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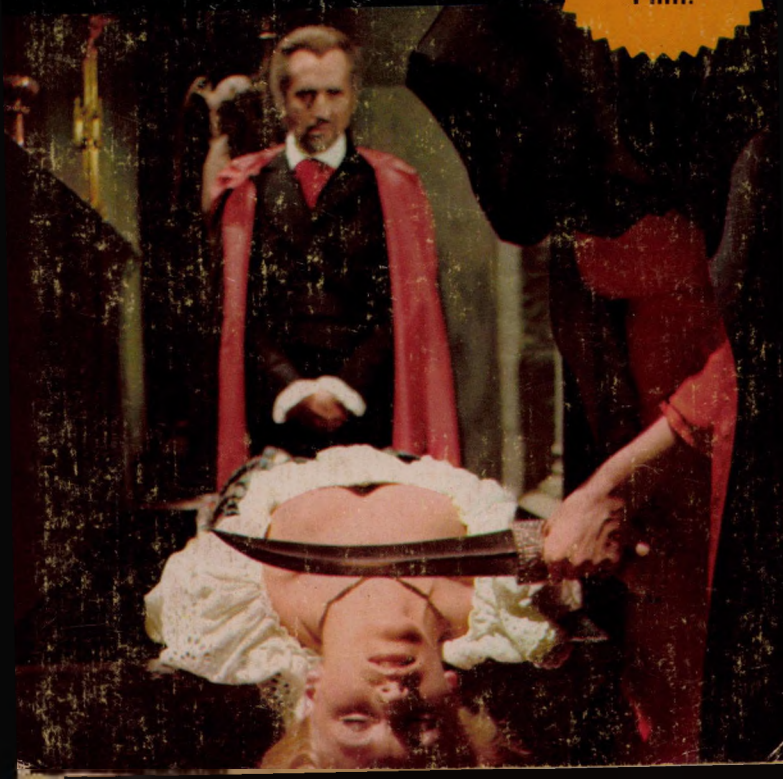

Lust For A Vampire

WILLIAM HUGHES

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LUST FOR A VAMPIRE

The Ruins of Karnstein Castle rose gaunt and menacing over the small hamlet of Styria. Legend had it that every forty years the long dead Karnsteins rose from their graves to find fresh blood and new recruits for the ranks of the Undead.

But legend is all too often dismissed as superstition . . . and now the grounds of Karnstein housed a select finishing school for young ladies.

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Directed by Jimmy Sangster.

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THE SCARS OF DRACULA
COUNTESS DRACULA
LUST FOR A VAMPIRE

LUST FOR A VAMPIRE

PROLOGUE

From the beginnings of recorded time, Man has filled the dark corners of his mind with thoughts of the unnatural and supernatural; facts that he cannot explain away and must therefore fear. Of these fears, one of the greatest is the age-old curse of blood-lust, and the worshipper's of blood – the undead – the Vampires.

Few are there, even as children, who have not shied away from an unknown noise in the darkness, a sudden cry, the beating of great wings, and who yet, in daylight, dismiss these fears as a trick of the mind.

But Vampirism is an evil and a plague that must be taken seriously and faced up to. Records of its incidence are scattered throughout the civilized world. Even in the Jungles of the New World, Pizzaro's followers reported the terrible creatures who hid in the darkness of swamp and forest to pounce on the unsuspecting traveller and take his blood to renew their own.

And in the heartlands of Europe, the Vampire has flourished as nowhere else in the world. Who has not heard tell of the exploits of Count Dracula and his family, who were once a scourge from the Black Forest to the Black Sea, and whom none know for sure if death has overtaken them.

But there are other families too, versed in the black arts, who embraced this strange creed, and were, in their turn, embraced by it. It is of one of these that I must tell.

My friend, Richard Lestrange, now fully recovered, and honeymooning with his new bride, has begged me to put his story on paper. You must know him well for his own writings, many of them on the subject of these same black arts. But his own story, he swore he would never write, the memory of it causes him too much distress. He claims too, that none will believe him, for truth has a habit of being stranger than the fictions of men's minds.

And so I will begin, but to begin, it is necessary to start at an earlier beginning, long before Richard came upon the scene, and found himself walking into a nightmare.

The Province of Styria lies in The Vastness of the Austro-Hungarian Empire between the Tyrol and Trieste. To the North is Vienna, the centre of the Empire, to the East the Danube and Buda-Pest, to the West the Alps. Styria itself is an area of mountains and valleys, lakes and rich meadows, a place of peace and quiet, the retreat of many of the great noble families of the Austrian Court. Here they have built their castles and hunting lodges, usually dominating a fertile valley and lake. The valley of Karnstein is no exception, and the remains of the great castle, its ruined tower pointing to heaven, stand as a shadowy sentinel over the whole life of the valley, the lake and the village nearby.

There are records of a noble Karnstein family in the twelfth century, when Styria was a powerful province within the Empire. The castle itself was built in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century by the first Count, who had been rewarded for a great pilgrimage and crusade that he had made to the Holy Land. He had returned to the Viennese Court by way of Ephesus and Constantinople and brought back many treasures and ancient documents, many of which, having been stolen from the infidel, made his reward that much greater.

He retired to his native Styria, and built himself a fine, strong castle, high in a pine forest at the head of a lush valley, and there he died at a ripe old age, many of the treasures he had brought with him, uninspected.

His son and grandson too were good men, God-fearing country gentlemen, content to hunt and treat their peasants well, and the valley prospered. But the fourth Count changed all that. Like his forebears, he had a promising enough start in life, then, as a young man, he suffered a terrible riding accident which left him with a twisted shoulder and a twisted leg. There were those who said the accident had also twisted his soul. Even so, he made a good marriage, and it might have made him a happy man, in spite of his infirmities had not his wife died in childbirth, and the issue of his loins with her.

After her death, the Count shut himself up in the castle, and set himself to translate the writing that his great-grandfather had so carelessly acquired. It was said that he had come across a great secret of the ancients in some of the writings, and was thenceforward seldom seen by even his servants. At night, he did not sleep, but would go for solitary walks in the forest, some times not returning until dawn, white with fatigue, his clothing

torn. There were ugly rumours that he indulged in unnatural practices, that he went out looking for the devil to give him his soul.

For twenty long years this state of affairs existed, and then, quite suddenly, the Count appeared amongst his people again. He was not an amiable man, and still held himself aloof from them, but men understood the twin causes of grief and shame at his infirmities and forgave him his surliness ; it was good that their master was amongst them again.

And then, in his seventieth year, he took to him a second bride. She was the beautiful daughter of one of his larger tenant-farmers, and though many were outraged at the idea, the girl's father seemed happy enough, and it was rumoured that the old man had paid a large sum for the girl.

Once again, the Count disappeared from the countryside this time with his bride, and in due course the villagers were told that the old man's prayers were answered, and that she was heavy with child. As soon as the news was made known, her doting father called at the castle to see his daughter, but was turned away by the servants, and none saw her again.

She died in child-birth, and the servants at the castle reported to their families in the village, that the issue was a boy, thin and pale as death.

The old Count died within a year of his bride, and the boy, the new master, was sent away to an uncle in Vienna for his rearing and education. It was twenty years before he returned to the valley and his home. When he came, the thin dark boy had grown into a thin dark man, pale as death. With him he brought his young bride, a girl of great beauty but of a countenance and pallor similar to her husband.

Like the Count's father, they kept to the castle, hardly venturing forth from one month's end to the next. As time past, old retainers were dismissed from the castle to be replaced by swarthy dark men from the south, who spoke in another tongue. The only one of them who was known in the village was the chief coachman, a vastly strong, sinister man with an evil squint, who would come to the village to collect the provisions that the farmers had a duty to supply to their master.

It was eighteen years before the Count appeared in public again, and only then because his marriage was finally blessed by an issue, a girl-child.

The Count and Countess brought the child to the village for

public baptism, on the sixteenth of June, 1688, as Parish records still show. The child was baptised and christened Carmilla, but the baptism gave no joy to the village, for, as the priest dipped his fingers in the holy water to make the sign of the cross on the child's forehead, there came a great clap of thunder that echoed through the whole church, and a storm raged the length of the valley, uprooting trees and destroying the young crops where they stood in the fields, and men went away from the ceremony feeling that a curse had come upon both the child and themselves.

The years passed and Carmilla grew up, and the memory of the terrible storm faded into the mists of simple men's minds. For now, there were other troubles in the valley. Men locked their doors at night and guarded their families closely, for over a space of twenty years, some ten girls were abducted to the woods, to be found later, their throats horribly torn, no blood left in their dead veins.

Carmilla grew to be a beautiful young girl and many expected that her parents would take her proudly to court to present her and find her a deserving husband, but it was not to be.

In the year 1710, a great plague came out of Asia and burned its way through Europe, killing thousands. Styria was as badly hit by it as other provinces of the empire, and soon men and women in the valley were dying. The final tragedy struck when word sped round the village that the young Countess Carmilla had been struck down by the disease, and, despite the feverish prayers of villagers and their priest, she died.

Word of her death came late at night to the priest, but he remembered his duty and went out to walk to the castle and give absolution to the dead and comfort to the living.

The night was fine as he set out, with a strong, full moon, but, as he approached the dark mass of the castle, up the steep road that led to the great iron gates at the foot of the carriageway, a great wind sprang up, and the moon was obscured by a sudden dense belt of cloud.

He heard a great noise, and suddenly, ahead of him, there loomed up out of the darkness, a huge black coach. He had only just time to throw himself into the grass at the side of the road, when it thundered by him. He got only a glimpse of the man on the box, a glimpse of the evil, squinting eyes, as one hand held the reins that controlled the great horses, and the other steadied a large plain coffin that lay on the roof of the coach

next to him. Whether the interior of the coach was occupied the priest was never able to tell.

The vehicle disappeared, and, by the time the priest rose, he could hear the thundering of hooves no more. He was surprised too to see that the wind had dropped and the sky was clear again. He went the last few hundred yards to the castle gate, and it was here that he got his second shock, for the gates were barred and locked, and the castle was in darkness.

None of the occupants of the castle, or the Count and Countess was ever seen again. But there were those amongst the villagers, both fathers and sons, who claimed they had not left the valley, and their malignant presence, for the simple mind always equates mystery with evil, was all around them, as if the whole valley was cursed. And every forty years since then, the valley has been plagued by great storms, and the disappearance and death of several villagers. Many bodies are never found, but those that are have their throats cruelly torn, as if by wild animals, though their faces seem to show that they have died of fear.

And so we come to this year of our Lord, 1870. Since the last mysterious visitations in 1830, new diseases and wars have swept through central Europe killing many of the old men, who were alive forty years ago, and the young ones no longer believe in the superstitions and fears of their grandparents, such is the spread of enlightenment, even in backwaters like the valleys of Styria.

Thus, there was no fear in the valley and the men and women went about their business, without pause to glance over their shoulder to any threat that might lurk in the forests. And yet, the curse of Karnstein was on the move again.

A young peasant girl walked through the grass that verged on the road that ran through the valley between the village and the mountainous approach to the castle. She carried a basket in which was the lunch that the local innkeeper had wrapped for her father and three brothers, working in the fields below the castle. It was only when the great black coach was close to her on the road that she noticed it, and looked up, for rich strangers were a rarity in the valley. The coach came to a halt almost at once, beside her, and she found herself looking into the evil, squinting eyes of the driver, the lower part of his face wrapped up in the great coat that he wore. Beside him, on the roof of

the coach lay a great box covered in a shroud of canvas.

The girl lowered her eyes then approached the coach door as a man's hand beckoned her. She looked up at the man who stared at her from the coach window, and saw the pale, bloodless face and the deep burning eyes that seemed to bore into her own. The coach door opened, and, hardly aware of what she was doing, the girl climbed in.

There were two figures in the coach, each seated with their backs to the driver. The girl sat down in the seat facing them, her eyes modestly on the ground. And, as she sat, she knew not why she had entered, or why she sat.

The coach jerked forward as if pulled towards the castle by an irresistible force, and the girl looked up, the spell broken by the jerk. The man opposite her had risen, and was now standing over her, his arms raised, his cloak like wings outstretched. He began to smile, and, for one peasant girl, the whole world went black.

The coach halted at the overgrown entrance to castle Karnstein and the coachman jumped down to force open the rusty, squeaking gates; then back up on his box for the short drive to the great stone steps that led to the main entrance to the castle. The old driveway was overgrown with weeds, weeds that had spread to the cracks between the great flagstones of the steps, and to the walls themselves.

As the coach halted, the two occupants climbed out and went quickly up the steps to the great double doors of the castle. These were of solid oak, and, though time had taken its toll of the surface, they were still solid and serviceable, keeping nature at bay. The man pushed one of the doors back, then stepped aside to allow his partner to enter before him. As he followed, he turned and nodded to the coachman.

Taking the order, the man patted the covered box by his side, then jumped down and lifted the peasant girl from the seat where she lay, her eyes closed, her breathing shallow, a drugged sleep more than a faint of terror. The coachman carried her up the steps and into the great hall of the castle. Inside, he stopped for a moment so that his eyes could become used to the gloom. Of his passengers there was no sign. He walked across the hall, and through an archway to the private chapel that the last Count had installed. The door was rotting on its hinges, everywhere was the smell of unhealthy damp, the furnishing

mouldering with long disuse, a home only for spiders and other insects of the forest.

In front of the altar was set a smooth stone slab, raised from the ground like the top of a grave. The coachman placed the girl on it, and stood back.

The man who had been in the coach stood by the altar. He had upended a great golden cross, and was now fitting black candles into the golden candlesticks, before lighting them. His servant waited as he completed the task, preparing the Chapel for the Unholy rites of the Black Mass. When he was satisfied, he came down from the altar, and sighed :

"Get her now." The words came from his throat, like the hiss of wind through the trees.

The coachman shuffled away, and, as he left the chapel, the coach's other occupant appeared from behind a pillar by the altar. The pale man held out his hand for her :

"At last, my dear, it is time."

The figure raised a hand to take the man's, and the cloak fell back, revealing the face of a once-beautiful woman, as pale and drawn as the man by her side, her lips and cheeks drained of all signs of blood. She was wearing a low-cut black dress that accentuated her still-lovely figure.

The coachman returned, dragging behind him the covered box that had travelled beside him on the roof of the coach – a plain, stout coffin, much-battered by time, but still intact. At his master's signal, he dragged it to a spot parallel with the sacrificial table that supported the peasant girl, and, at last, all was nearly ready. The coachman flicked away the covering, then knelt down to lift the lid from the coffin. The stench of decay from within caused him to jump back as the lid was loosened, and it fell with a clatter that echoed round the high-vaulted, dank chamber.

Inside the coffin were the rotting remains of an ancient shroud, still partially covering a grinning skeleton. The servant was dismissed with an imperious gesture and shuffled out of the room, having no wish to witness the strange rites that now commenced.

The man went back to the altar and stood in front of the upturned cross, lifting his eyes to it, as he muttered an incantation to his devil. Then, from an inside pocket, he produced a Jewelled dagger that glinted in his eyes as the flickering light of the black candles passed over it. This he laid on the Altar in

front of the Cross, then he muttered another incantation and backed away from the Altar to stand by the body of the unconscious girl.

It was the turn of the woman now. She went forward slowly and lifted her eyes to the upturned cross. She muttered her own incantation, then reached forward and picked up the dagger. She held it in front of her with both hands as she came down from the altar, then stood by the man. He reached forward as the girl began to move. His cold, bloodless fingers gripped the material of her blouse, then ripped it down in a sudden movement that revealed the small, round breasts.

The girls eyes flickered open as the woman stood above her, the knife poised in her left hand. In the moment that was left to her, she saw hate glittering in the coal-black eyes that confronted hers. She tried to twist away, and opened her mouth to scream as the dagger flashed down to its appointed mark. The girl died before her scream of fear reached her lips, and the blood rose in great gouts from the wound in her breast.

But, if the girl could not cry out as she went to her Maker, the very earth seemed to cry out for her. There was a great rushing of wind around the castle, and the sun was suddenly obscured so that the men looked up from their work in the field and drew their coats more tightly around them, and marvelled at God's weather.

In the flickering half-darkness of the chapel, the woman stepped forward again to her victim, a great chalice held in both hands. The man lifted the dead girl up, so that the stream of blood from the wound flowed downwards and was collected in the chalice. Only when the vessel was full was the girl's body allowed to drop.

The woman handed the full chalice to the man, the blood still warm and frothing, and both moved slowly over to stand beside the coffin, looking down for a moment at the skeleton that had once been human.

Both cried forth a great incantation to their devil, then the man poured the blood over the skeleton, before the woman picked up a white linen shroud from the ground by the Altar and deftly let it fall, obscuring the skeleton. The bloodstains soaked into the whiteness and the outline of the bones could be seen through the thin covering. Then, all at once, there came another rushing of the wind, and the thing hidden by the shroud stirred and grew. Slowly at first, the shape changed,

then assumed human form. It began to move and a hand appeared from beneath the shroud to pluck it away.

The man and woman took a pace back and watched and waited. As the first rain fell, the figure beneath the shroud rose, and the covering fell away as the bloodstains on it disappeared.

A girl stood naked in the coffin, her eyes still shut. For a moment neither she nor her resurrectors moved. The man and woman glanced at her nakedness; the curve of the white neck, the full swell of the breasts, the flat stomach and lean thighs. Then the girl's eyes opened and she looked round her, unconscious of her nakedness. When she saw the man and woman, she stepped forward, her arms outstretched. Each of them took one of her hands, and their smiles matched her own. In a thin voice, as if unused to speaking, the girl said:

"Father . . . Mother."

"It is all right, my child," said the woman. "We are all together again."

"Together," echoed the man. "We have returned to our inheritance once more."

For the first time in 160 years, there were Karnsteins at Karnstein Castle.

For the rest of the day and all through the night, the storm raged. The old men nodded their heads and thought of the dreadful storm that had come on the day of the baptism of the last of the Karnsteins, a story handed to them by their grandparents from their parents.

But in the morning, the world was at peace once again. The sun shone and the birds sang in the trees. Only two men seemed still disturbed by the events of the afternoon before; the father of the girl who had disappeared, and the young man from the village who had been courting her. Together, they searched in the woods, and came at last to the gates of the castle. They put their weight against them, but the rusty old iron was too much for them. Anyway, there was no sign that any man had passed that way, no tracks on the path, no treading down of grass or weed.

The local policeman, out of deference to the farmer, whose family were old friends, listened seriously to the tale of the disappearance, but when the farmer had gone, he put the report he had made out to one side and shrugged as he said to his wife:

"Young girls. They run off every day. It is some man she is

with, there is no mystery. Thank God, my dear, that we have no daughter, or it would be happening to us one of these days."

And so, the night and the storm and the disappearance were quickly forgotten, or so it seemed. But all that I have told happened in the Spring of 1870, and, already, plans were under way that were to bring visitors to the valley of Karnstein and a summer of terror to the countryside. Already, some of the visitors were on their way, journeying across Europe, as was my young friend. Richard Lestrange, and it is his story that I must now tell.

CHAPTER ONE

It was a month after the events I have related that Richard Lestrange arrived in the Valley of the Karnsteins. It was a fine, hot summer's day, and, after he had made sure of one of the tiny inn's rooms, he sat in the bar, looking around him at the locals, with almost as much interest as they showed in him, and humming happily to himself as his eye passed over the comely form of the serving girl.

Richard had every reason to be pleased with himself that summer. At the age of twenty-seven, he was handsome, and knew it, charming, and was aware of it, and a best-selling novelist, and revelled in it. The literary weekly that had carried the serial of his last book, an exciting three-volume novel about horrific Druidic rites on the island of Anglesey, had been sold out on its day of publication each week, and now, with another book already written and with his publishers, he had felt that the time had come for a break.

He had also been feeling stale, and he had thought six months on the Continent would bring him new ideas and fresh stories with which to delight his hordes of readers; perhaps he would even get an idea for a new tale of the legendary Vampires of Eastern Europe. He knew these were merely the superstitious imaginings of a backward people, but even so, they were exciting enough to interest the middle class British reading public.

Richard smiled boyishly as the girl, Trudi, bustled towards him, carrying a huge tray, laden with food, which she deposited on his table. She leant forward to serve him, and he was delighted to watch the swell of her breast as it pressed against the thin cotton blouse. When he spoke, the soft Irish burr added an extra charm to his voice:

"Ah, that does look good, and welcome." He put his hand briefly on the girl's thigh: "And so do you, Trudi, good enough to eat."

The girl giggled and he winked at her. She took a pace back out of his reach. She was happy enough that the stranger wished to flirt with her, but anything so blatantly public was new to her. Richard could see that the villagers and the landlord were eyeing even more closely than before. Trudi laid out his meal,

then retired to the bar, still giggling. As Richard watched her go, admiring the smooth movement and swing of her young body, he became aware of the landlord's glare, and lowered his eyes quickly to his food. It would do no good to quarrel with the man on his first day in the valley. From what he had seen of it, it was a beautiful place to holiday in, and the gaunt ruins of a castle he had glimpsed on the mountainside looked well worth exploring, could perhaps be in his book.

He looked up as the landlord came out from behind the bar, and lumbered over to him. Half-way to Richard, he was stopped by one of the local farmers.

"Who is the stranger?"

The landlord shrugged and raised his eyebrows in a sign that is the same the world over – all strangers are madmen.

"A writing gentleman. From England."

The farmer nodded and went back to his beer. That explained everything. Richard lowered his eyes again, trying to hide the amusement. The girl returned bearing a flagon of ale, which she put on the table. Richard grabbed her hand to stop her departure.

"Do you live at the inn, my dear?"

The girl tugged to withdraw her hand, but Richard held it fast. She nodded towards the approaching landlord, then said with urgent pleading:

"I must go."

"There's no hurry, my dear."

He frowned as the girl tugged once more for the release of her hand, then stood, looking apologetically at her master as he came to a halt by the table. Her jerked his head sharply, an order to Trudi to get out of the bar and back to the kitchens. She, in turn, looked pleadingly at Richard, who reluctantly let go of her hand. She hurried off immediately, and Richard watched admiringly as she left the room.

He turned back to his meal, and deigned to notice the landlord for the first time.

"Is something troubling you, landlord?"

The man sat down heavily on the bench facing Richard and put the great hams that passed for his hands on the rough wooden surface of the table. His manner might seem threatening, but his voice was respectful.

"I'd like a word with you, Mr. Lestrange."

Richard flashed his smile.

"I'll not invite you to sit down, for you are sitting already, but have a glass of wine with me."

The landlord nodded his thanks, then turned and roared to the barman to bring a bottle of the local wine and two glasses. Only when these had arrived and had been poured, did he lean forward to speak to his visitor again.

"I don't want you to be thinking that we are without hospitality, sir. And I know there's no harm, in normal times, in having a joke with a serving girl, a laugh or two – but these ain't normal times."

He paused to take a gulp of wine. Richard frowned, annoyed by the snub, but curious as to the meaning of the last part of the man's remarks.

"And what is abnormal, pray?"

The landlord shook his head, reluctant to answer directly.

"Sir, you'll find no young girl in this village who is willing to talk much with a stranger – and this will be the first night that you have spent under this roof."

"It will probably be the last, too," snapped Richard, now definitely annoyed by the man's tone.

The landlord reddened, stung by the remark, but, realising that the stranger did not know the reasons behind it, he tried, in his turn, to remain friendly.

"Do you not know what year this is?"

"1870, as I recall – it is at least so in England."

"Yes," sighed the landlord. "It is 1870. It has been forty years since they were last among us, and before that, it was forty years again."

The landlord lapsed into silence, like a good storyteller, leaving Richard dangling. When he saw the man was not going to continue without some show of interest on his part, he leaned forward.

"Oh? Really? Who?"

"The Karnsteins."

"I don't believe I know them," sighed Richard, to whom the name meant nothing.

The landlord frowned in disbelief.

"But that is their castle, up on the hill."

Richard pricked up his ears at once, perhaps this was the sort of story he wanted to hear. Still, it would do no good to look too interested.

"Yes, of course, the great ruin. I plan to go and have a look

at it – but I thought the family that used to rule this valley were all dead?"

The landlord pushed his face closer to his visitor's and his voice sank to a conspiratorial whisper.

"Dead as far as it concerns the rest of the world, sir. But in this valley, we call them the un-dead. They are the vampires."

Richard stared into the man's face, looking for a hint of a smile that would give away the joke. Then he felt a cold tingling down his spine, as no such hint appeared. He gave an abrupt, false laugh. The landlord sat back, staring with resentment at this reaction to his warning. Richard quickly glanced round, and saw that the other villagers in the inn were all glaring at him with an hostility similar to the landlord's. They had heard everything, or knew what the innkeeper had been saying. Richard turned back to his companion.

"My God, you all believe in it, don't you?"

"Believe, sir? It is not a question of belief. We all know the Karnsteins."

Richard felt his humour definitely restored. The ancient superstitions of these people would give him material for a good story, perhaps more than one.

"Tell me more, I am very interested."

The landlord nodded, satisfied that his warning was at last getting through to his guest.

"Well, sir, what you said about the Karnstein family being dead is true in its way. But still, they have the secret power to reincarnate themselves. And now, it is the time for them to come back once more to the valley, and I tell you, sir, this village lives in terror of them."

"I can see that you are all disturbed by the thought, but in terror of what?"

"They prey on young virgins," sighed the landlord. "They put a spell on them first. Then they sometimes court them, slowly sucking their life away. Or, sometimes they kill quickly, one feast, one pierce of the fangs."

Richard laughed out loud at this fancy.

"Well, landlord, you have nothing to fear for me. I'm not a young virgin."

The landlord reddened with anger.

"You may laugh now, sir. But men have been their victims, too. And I wouldn't advise you to allow yourself to be enticed by any beautiful stranger that you might meet."

"Just give me the chance to be, that's all I ask," grinned Richard.

The landlord rose, still red. Richard realised that he was making an enemy of the man with his sneers. Contrite, he put his hand on the man's arm, signalling him to sit again, and the laughter went out of his face, with some effort.

"Look, inn-keeper, I'm sorry. I understand that you all feel strongly about this. But it is mere superstition. You have grown up with it, but you cannot expect me, a stranger, to take it seriously, can you?"

"I've told you what I know. I've warned you. I cannot do more, sir."

"And it was very interesting, particularly to me. That's the real reason for my travels, you know. I want to get background for the books I write. I'm a novelist. I write all the time about vampires and witches and the art of Black Magic – but it is all the product of my imagination, and I know it."

"Then how would you explain this to your imagination, sir. There's a village girl missing now – been gone missing for a month. At first it was thought that she had run off – but she was not one who would run off anywhere. She was a good girl, and a month of checking has brought no trace of her to light outside this valley. Would you be the one to tell her parents that they are just imagining she has disappeared?"

"But she might be anywhere." The look on the other man's face told him there was nothing to be gained by trying to argue the point logically, and he managed a placating smile.

"I'll tell you what. Since you are all terrified of Karnstein castle, I think I'll go up there just after lunch. I might just find one of those beautiful vampires you spoke of, just waiting to entice me."

He smiled round the room, delighted by his joke, and the shocked, fearful, effect that it had on the occupants of the inn. There was no return to his smile or wink, and he set to work at his food. The landlord rose and looked down at him, his face a mixture of pity and anger. At last he shook his head, despairing of the Englishman, and went slowly back to the bar.

At lunchtime, the joke had seemed a good one, but now, as Richard toiled up the hill to the castle in the heat of the sun, he began to have qualms about his boast.

He looked up at the crumbling edifice above him. The afternoon was warm, and the castle blended in to the summer countryside with no hint of evil . . . and yet . . .

Richard laughed harshly, and pulled himself together, to move forward again. The landlord's strange tale was preying on his nerves, nothing more.

He reached the gate of the castle, and frowned, for it was here that the first real foreboding overtook him. He had been told that the gates were old and rusty, and almost impossible to open, certainly the villagers would never do so, but now one stood open, and the grass and weeds around were trampled down. The move had been recent, for the yellow line still showed in the grass where the great heavy iron had rested when the gate was closed. He went forward through the gap, and proceeded with some caution up the overgrown drive to the imposing front entrance, still impressive despite nature's covering.

At the top of the cracked flagstones, one of the great double doors to the castle stood open, as had the iron gate at the entrance, and Richard was forced to brace himself before walking up the steps into the damp, dark interior.

It took him only a moment to get used to the gloom, pierced here and there by shafts of light that came from holes in the high, vaulted ceiling of the great hall. He looked around. Everything was touched with the atmosphere of death and decay, the thick cobwebs of centuries obscuring every surface. He wrinkled his nose in distaste at the stench of the decay as he moved round the hall.

On the far side was an archway that led to another gloomy hall beyond, the rotted door to the next room lying useless on its hinges, a hard enough push would send it crashing to the ground. Richard walked slowly through the archway and found himself in the remains of a private chapel. Once again, the high vaulted roof was in need of urgent repair if another century of neglect were not to ruin it entirely.

He walked forward, down the centre of the chapel as his eyes once more became accustomed to the gloom. Just short of the altar was a raised stone tomb. He ran a hand over the surface of it, surprised by the lack of dust that covered the rest of the chapel. Then he bent closer, his eye caught by a dark stain on the stone. For a moment he thought it might be blood, and recent blood at that, then his common sense re-asserted itself, only to be rocked again as he looked up at the altar.

On it, he could see the cross upturned, half-melted black candles in the candlesticks, all the trappings of a black mass.

Richard fought back a sudden rising wave of panic, pushing it down with his reason. None of the stories about the castle could possibly be true. Someone had come here recently, playing sick games, perhaps after his boast at the inn. But who? None of the villagers would have come near the place. He might have laughed at their fears, and their strange story, but he had sensed the fear in them as being real enough.

"Ridiculous," he said aloud, then felt panic rising again as his word echoed round the high vaulted ceiling.

He moved up the steps to the altar, and was once again surprised. There was only a light film of dust on the altar cloth, which was almost new and had not succumbed to the damp and decay of its environment.

Richard decided abruptly that he had had enough of this exploration. He decided to return to the fresh air and the village at once, postponing any further exploration till another day.

He walked quickly back down the aisle and through the gloomy archway to the main hall, thence straight across to the main door and the sunlight beyond. Halfway across the hall, he stopped abruptly and felt his head swimming with the shock of what he saw. A girl was standing there, silhouetted in the sunlight. As he looked towards her, she smiled invitingly.

For a moment, he was rooted to the spot, then, from where he had come, he heard the sound of echoing ghostly laughter. He turned abruptly to face this new threat, and saw another young, shapely figure standing in the half-shadow of the arch.

Panic was rising in him now, and could not be fought back. On the far side of the hall was another archway and he made quickly for it. But again he was pulled up short as another figure appeared blocking that exit too.

The new apparition started to move towards him, a smile on her lips, Richard glanced round and saw that the other two were moving forward in similar fashion. He braced himself, ready to make a dash for it, calculating his chances of reaching past the threatening advance and making the main door and the sunlight.

He was about to make his move when the light from the main entrance was suddenly blocked out by the arrival of a newcomer. This time it was a man, tall and thin, wearing a frock-coat, and with pebble-thick glasses obscuring his eyes. To

Richard he looked the epitome of evil as he stood, quite still, in the entrance.

Richard gave way to blind panic, opened his mouth to yell for help. A thin, high voice came to him:

"Girls. What is going on? Girls, please."

Richard closed his mouth abruptly. What trick, what sorcery was this? Was that his own voice that he had heard. Then his eyes focussed again on the man in the doorway, as he clapped his hands together, and said:

"Girls, please."

Richard stood in the courtyard in front of the castle, trying hard not to show the embarrassment he had felt at his show of panic. The three girls who had so frightened him were revealed now as healthy young women, each about eighteen, as they stood demurely nearby, casting inquisitive glances at him, but in a ladylike manner, and blushing and looking away as he stared back at them. They were dressed in flowing white gowns, like ancient Greeks, but unfortunately not as thin as the ancient garments, thought Richard with an inward sigh.

The man who had so frightened him now came hurrying down the steps, bumbling his way forward, tall, thin and dark, yes, but no longer in any way a menace.

"Girls, we must be getting back."

He stood beside Richard for a moment, then made a deprecatory gesture, indicating that he was going to follow the girls, and inviting Richard to do the same.

"Young man." The man could not be much older than himself, yet the words seemed to come naturally from him. "I am sorry for the fright we gave you, but – I do not even know your name?"

It was the very prissy Englishness of his new companion that made Richard more ashamed than ever of his sudden panic. He smiled and answered:

"My name is Richard Lestrange."

The man looked at him sharply, his eyes glinting with a sudden interest behind their thick covering.

"Richard Lestrange? That wouldn't by any chance be one of the Lestranges of Cork?"

"Yes," snapped Richard.

"Then you must be Lord Thurston's son – and the heir to the title."

Richard blushed. He did not like to talk much of his lordly connections, they had proved a positive disadvantage to his career as a writer in the past.

"That's right – but how on earth did you know?"

The man hesitated before replying, as the girls ahead of them went through the old gateway, and, instead of taking the road that led down to the village, they took a path that went down the mountainside at an angle, the men following, then:

"Genealogy is my pet subject, I'm afraid – I apologise if I have been over-inquisitive, I know what a bore I can be."

"It doesn't matter. I am only surprised at being unmasked so far from home."

The stranger nodded an acceptance of the remark, then felt further explanation was due.

"That's really why I brought the girls up to the castle, just an excuse really, to help me in my researches. They were a fascinating family, the Karnsteins."

Richard abruptly pulled his eyes away from the girls, he would be more interested in them than the long-dead Karnsteins. The other man volunteered no further information, taking Richard's glance as a sign that he was not interested. After a minute of this new silence Richard asked:

"I'm sure such research must be fascinating – but tell me more about the girls?"

The man glanced vaguely at them, as if they were of no interest at all – genealogically, that is, then:

"That one's Susan Pelly, she's from America, her father is one of the new millionaires – a businessman."

The tone of his voice implied that the man could be forgiven being an American but not being a businessman. Richard studied the girl. She had brown hair, and an open, fresh face, surmounting a good young figure. He glanced at the second, a neatly-built brunette.

"That's Isabel Courtney – one of the Hampshire Courtneys – interesting family."

He seemed disappointed when Richard did not pick up his bait, and quickly went on to the third girl.

"And she's Amanda McBride. Her father is a Scottish landowner. Nice girl."

It was obvious that the man had an almost worshipful respect for the old monied classes of the English shires.

"They're all charming," smiled Richard.

The stranger took his arm, on his face an expression of genuine contrition.

"You must forgive me. I haven't even had the courtesy to introduce myself. I'm Giles Barton. The school's just ahead of us, through these trees."

As they ducked the branches, Richard asked:

"School?"

He was partially answered by the sight on the other side of the trees. Rolling lawns led to a large building, not more than fifty years old, of stone and the soft red brick of the district. It looked as if it might have belonged to a wealthy country gentleman, but the sight on the lawns gave this impression the lie. A group of girls were performing a strange dancing exercise, dressed in robes similar to the ones that Richard's three temptresses had been wearing. They were under the command of a young woman not much older than themselves, with a trim figure that took Richard's fancy at once, and long, golden hair.

A terrace separated the lawns from the house, and, at the top of the steps, stood a middle-aged woman, watching her charges. As Richard and Giles started across the lawn, Giles said:

"I teach here – history and art. The Principal over there is Miss Simpson. I'm her partner in this enterprise." He giggled almost like a girl and went on:

"We've only been here for a few weeks. It's quite the new vogue you know, a finishing school on the continent. Quite an exciting venture for us."

He saw Richard's eyes were fixed on the young lady who was in charge of the girls on the lawn.

"I see you're watching Janet Playfair. She's the gym mistress. She was with Miss Simpson at Heathley Hall. This is one of the new fads in physical exercise. It's based on Graeco-Roman dancing techniques."

Richard watched delighted as the girls went through the figure-flattering calisthenics.

"Is it, indeed."

Giles held up his hand, a signal for Richard to stay where he was.

"We'd better wait here. Miss Simpson isn't too fond of strangers getting near the girls. The class will be finished in a few minutes and then I'll introduce you."

"To Miss Playfair, you mean?"

"No. To Miss Simpson."

Richard did not have long to wait. In a silvery voice that he noticed he found quite delightful, Janet Playfair dismissed her girls, who, with a series of shy, giggling glances towards the newcomer, ran off into the building to change. Giles then led Richard forward and up the steps towards the forbidding Miss Simpson. He found himself somewhat uncomfortable under the gimlet power of her gaze.

"Miss Simpson, I'd like you to meet Mr. Richard Lestrange, the author."

"The author?" The voice as well as the manner showed total disapproval. Richard found that he was being apologetic as he replied:

"Yes."

"Lord Thurston's son," said Giles helpfully.

Miss Simpson's manner underwent a perceptible change as her frame relaxed. The son of a peer, even an Irish peer, carried his own badge of respectability.

"Oh – then you will always be welcome at my school, Mr. Lestrange. But your books will not be, I am sorry to say. They are quite unsuitable for girls of an impressionable age."

Richard squirmed at the patronage.

"No, probably not. A bit too frightening, perhaps. However, if you would like me to lecture the girls on English literature at any time . . ."

Miss Simpson cut him off with an imperious gesture and said coldly:

"Thank you, but no. We have a teacher of English arriving on Wednesday. Now, if you will excuse me.' '

She held out her hand, which Richard took, making a major effort to hide his reluctance. But at that moment, the attention of all three of them was distracted as Susan Pelley, the American girl, ran out onto the terrace.

"Excuse me, Miss Simpson."

"Yes, child, what is it?"

"Miss Carstairs asked me to tell you that there is a coach arriving."

"Thank you."

Susan went back into the building and Miss Simpson preened herself. Richard cast a questioning glance at Giles, who said, after a momentary hesitation:

"That will be the Countess Herritzen. We've been expecting

her all day. She's bringing her niece to join the school."

He and Miss Simpson began to walk down the terrace, to reach the front of the house. Richard found himself torn between walking with them, and waiting for Janet Playfair who was now coming across the lawn and up the steps. The dilemma was solved for him when she stepped alongside him and began to follow the others. She gave Richard what he took as an encouraging smile of welcome as they walked, and appraised him with a glance that was obviously approving, yet not unladylike.

The party came round to the large driveway in front of the building, just as the coach drew up at the entrance. Richard was quite taken aback by the size of the huge black coach, the coachman perched atop the box, his body and faced swathed in a big cloak.

On the coach door was a faded coat of arms, and he saw Giles glance at it, trying to make out the armorial bearings. At that moment, the coach door swung open and Richard's eyes widened as he saw the woman who emerged. This, without any doubt, was the Countess Herritzen, tall, dark, imperious, her clothes slightly old-fashioned, and black, yet somehow adding dignity and attraction to her still-impressive figure. She stepped down, and her place at the carriage door was taken by a sight that caused Richard's eyes to open even further.

The girl was beautiful, more so than any he had ever seen. She was tall, with long blonde hair. Her face was pale above the slender neck, her figure divine, or so it seemed to the onlooker. Richard estimated that she must be twenty-one or twenty-two.

He glanced at Janet by his side, and saw that her smile for him had been replaced by a scowl. Richard had no time to be amused by the tension he had unwittingly created, for the two newcomers were advancing towards the group.

The Countess reached Miss Simpson, and, as she glanced at the others, she held out a languid pale hand. Miss Simpson took it, and curtsied.

"Countess."

The woman acknowledged the greeting with a flicker of her eyes, deep, coal-black, Richard noted, then stepped aside and announced imperiously:

"My niece, Mircalla."

The girl came forward, her eyes modestly downcast, and curtsied low before Miss Simpson. Richard observed the nape of

her neck, and luxuriated in the beauty of it. A glance to his right showed him that Giles was similarly occupied behind his thick spectacles. He took his eyes away with an effort as Miss Simpson took the girl's hand and said:

"This is my partner, Mr. Giles Barton, and this is Mr. Richard Lestrange, the celebrated author."

There was a note of disapproval in this second introduction, but Miss Simpson was forced to wait patiently as Richard bowed low, a contrast to Giles' curt, shy nod. She filled the wait by turning to the Countess.

"He is Lord Thurston's son."

The Countess acceded to this information with a raised eyebrow of approval, which delighted Miss Simpson. Perhaps Mr. Lestrange was not such an unwelcome intruder on the school after all.

Richard raised his head, and his eyes locked on the girl's. He seemed to sense something in her that he could feel repeated in himself. As if, in that one tiny moment, something had passed between them and a bond had been formed that would not easily be broken, a strange magnetism. Richard could feel his heart pounding against his ribs.

He flicked his eyes away as he became conscious that the Countess was watching him closely, as if willing him to look away from her niece. He felt confused, and hoped that she had not really seen what had passed between them in that one glance.

Miss Simpson was positively simpering.

"Shall we go inside and take some tea."

The sun was low, almost ready to disappear behind the mountains as Richard walked briskly back to the village and the inn. He whistled happily as he went, in spite of the fact that tea had not been altogether a success.

When they had got inside the house, the beautiful Mircalla had been whisked away by the Matron, Miss Carstairs, to be shown her sleeping quarters, and to get her unpacked and settled in.

Tea had been taken in Miss Simpson's drawing room, next to her office, a room crammed with incredible chintzes and knick-knacks which reflected her prissy exact mind more than her own appearance. It had been a cold formal affair, in spite of the presence of Janet Playfair, who chose to direct most of her

conversation at Giles, being still put out at the attention Richard had taken away from her to display to the newcomer.

He had left the school, with an invitation from the friendly scholarly Giles to pay another visit soon, but without another sight of the girl. The coach was still in the drive-way, and, as he walked past it, he became aware that he was being stared at, sensed that someone was sitting in the coach, watching him from the darkness.

He turned suddenly, but there was only the coachman, seated on the box, still swathed in his cloak, staring at the entrance to the school building as he waited for the Countess to emerge.

As he neared the inn, darkness was falling, and he paused to glance back up the road, before saying, out loud, to himself:

"Richard, my boy, by hook or by crook, you've got to get busy and get back to that school."

He walked forward again. Perhaps some wine and company would put his brain to work on an idea that would get him there to stay, and welcome.

CHAPTER TWO

Richard was gratified to find that the villagers seemed in a better mood with him that evening. He bought drinks at the bar, and watched with an objective appreciation as Trudi went about her business collecting the used glasses and mugs and taking them to the kitchens to be cleaned. At last, in front of a goodly audience, the landlord said:

"And after your boasting at lunch, sir, did you go to the castle this afternoon?"

"I did that," laughed Richard. "And came close to being seen off by the devil himself."

The landlord frowned briefly but seemed reassured by the laughter. With a little bit of coaxing Richard, who was not loathe to do so, started telling of his adventure at the castle, and of his meeting with the girls from the school.

The men laughed with genuine enjoyment, for Richard, as befitted his business, was a good teller of tales. But he could sense in their laughter, relief as well as enjoyment . . .

". . . It seemed to be just as your good landlord here said. My

God, I thought, they've got me, trapped me. It is the Karnsteins come for my body and soul. I backed away slowly from this beautiful girl . . ."

He noticed Trudi with appreciation as she moved past him, close, with a tray full of dirty glasses. There was an old dog by the fireplace, and now it rose to follow her as she went out to the kitchens. Richard kept watching her as he went on with his story. She put the glasses down on a table that was blocked from his sight by the door, then turned to the door that led to the back yard of the inn, and by which the dog was now sitting patiently. She opened it, and the dog went into the night, the girl at his heels, closing the door behind her as she went.

". . . They stood there, all three of them, all silent. Then they moved towards me, and I found myself unable to run . . ."

Richard watched the closed back door, mentally waiting for Trudi to return. He reached the denouement of his story, but still neither girl nor dog had put in an appearance.

"Three beautiful girls. And all they were on was an educational tour of Karnstein Castle with one of their masters. And thanks to you, landlord, I thought that they were all vampires out after my blood."

The villagers were helpless with coarse, friendly laughter, in which both the landlord and Richard joined.

Then, out of the night, came a piercing, rending scream, like a great animal in its death agonies.

There was no sound in the bar and everyone was still, too terrified to move. Richard was the first to recover his senses. He had heard a similar noise once before. The sound of a boar being lanced when he had gone boar-hunting with his father. The dying screech of the animal had chilled his blood then, as this new sound did now.

No one else had recovered enough to move as Richard leapt from his bar stool, and made for the back door. He had no idea from where the sound had come, but instinct drove him in this direction. The villagers, woken from their shock by his movement, crowded after him as he wrenched the door open.

The yard was lighter than he expected, as a full moon shone down from a cloudless night sky. Outside the door, almost at his feet, the old dog was cringing and whining as it looked up at him.

On the other side of the yard lay a pile of clothes, unmoving. Richard raced over, and knelt by the side of the fallen figure.

It was the body of a girl, lying face downwards in the dirt.

He turned it over and stared into Trudi's lifeless face, as her dead eyes stared back up at him. Her face, in the moonlight, seemed shrivelled and shrunken, as if there was no blood under the skin. It was horribly screwed up with fear.

His hands shaking, the nausea rising within him, Richard turned the head instinctively and glanced at the neck. On her throat was bruising, and two punctures, dried blood round their edges – the twin marks of the bite of the vampire.

As the others crowded round, Richard pulled her hair across the neck so that they could not see the marks. Then, leaving the body, he walked back into the inn, and sat down heavily on one of the benches, staring unseeing in front of him. His mind was in a turmoil, perhaps the warning he had received was true, perhaps the Karnsteins were vampires and still prowled at night through the district, striking terror into those who lived there.

The feeling of sickness subsided, and Richard shook his head to clear his thoughts. It must be the dog that killed her, jumping up and biting, perhaps severing the artery with his teeth. But the dog was old, and seemed to have been frightened by what had happened. No, the death could not be explained in natural terms that simply.

Richard's English common sense returned to him. There must be some reasonable explanation for the death, and he found himself uncharitably pleased that the tragedy had occurred in the village and not at the school.

At the moment of the dying girl's scream, Susan Pelly, the American girl, had been hurrying quietly through the darkness to the lake, her mind in its own turmoil, as she tried to put her thoughts in order and get a grip on the new-found emotions that were attacking and overwhelming her.

It had all started when Miss Carstairs had come bustling along the corridor towards her that afternoon, trailing in her wake a beautiful young girl.

"Ah Susan. This is Mircalla, who is joining us. There's a spare place in your room and I'd like you to take her there and get her settled in."

Susan had looked at the newcomer, and had found herself suddenly riveted by the girl's eyes, unable to tear her own away from them.

The girls all slept in small dormitory studies, four to a room,

and Susan had been happy to get the newcomer settled in in the bed next to her, her things unpacked and hung in the wardrobe space assigned to her.

This task completed, they went down to supper, and, after supper, Susan showed Mircalla round the school. They had just got back to their room when they heard Janet Playfair's voice in the corridor:

"Come along now, girls. Time for lights out soon."

Susan began to undress at once, and Mircalla slowly started to follow suit.

"How do you feel?" asked Susan.

"Very tired," replied the girl. She had just the trace of a light foreign accent, more English in it than Susan's American twang.

"It needs a while to get used to."

The newcomer shrugged, looked helpless.

"I don't think I shall ever get used to it."

"Yes, you will, in time."

Susan was down to her underwear, but Mircalla had only just got the back of her dress unbuttoned. The American girl went over, knelt on the bed, and began to massage the newcomer's neck.

"Does that feel any better?"

Mircalla nodded without speaking, and Susan deftly slipped the dress off the girl's shoulders to get a better grip on her neck. The dress slid to her waist. Susan was too busy to notice that Mircalla wore nothing underneath.

"I know what," said Susan, not knowing what prompted her to make the suggestion. She liked the new girl, felt more comfortable with her than with the others. Perhaps it was because the other pupils were all British. "As soon as it's lights out, let's go down to the lake for a moonlight swim. That'll make you feel much better."

"But won't Miss Playfair be around."

"Oh, that's easily taken care of. We'll put a couple of pillows in each bed – there are plenty on the other two spare ones. She'll think that we're asleep."

Mircalla seemed to make up her mind to a sudden decision.

"Yes . . . all right. We'll go at midnight."

Susan got off the bed, and Mircalla stood up. The dress slipped from her waist to the floor, revealing her to be completely naked. Susan felt the breath painful as she drew it in. Her eyes viewed the perfect alabaster body of the Austrian girl; the high

full breasts, the lean, smooth, flat stomach with its tiny navel, the small triangle of light hair at its base. Susan felt a welling of emotion within her at the sight, which she had never experienced before, and which puzzled and frightened her.

At that moment, Janet Playfair opened the door and looked into the room. Despite her underwear, Susan blushed and covered herself. Janet glanced first at her, then her gaze lingered over Mircalla's naked body, as if admiring it, but in a clinical way, not with the same emotion as Susan. The Austrian girl had made no attempt to cover herself, and, her lips slightly parted, she was smiling at the gym mistress. Abruptly, Janet ceased her inspection.

"Hurry up, you two. Lights out at any minute."

Then the door had slammed behind her.

Susan waited patiently the two hours that separated lights out from midnight. Then she had scrambled out of her bed, and had gone over to wake Mircalla. But the other girl was not, as she had supposed, asleep, but staring up at the ceiling, her dark eyes glinting in the moonlight.

Quickly, the two girls had stuck the extra pillows in their beds, and then had crept along the corridor, down the stairs, and to the side door that led to the yard at one side of the house. On the other side of the yard lay the stables, the stable lofts converted into quarters for Giles, and the English master who was due to arrive the following day. On the far side, beside the stables, was the old well that had once served the house with water, a strip of woodland, and then the lakeside.

Susan signalled that they must go silently across the yard, one at a time. She went first, but, safely to the other side, when she turned to beckon Mircalla to follow she could not see the girl. The side door had not re-opened and shut again, so Susan knew that she had not gone back inside.

She waited for a moment, but there was no sign of Mircalla, and, disappointed, she went through the trees, down to the lake by herself, hoping against hope that the other girl was also on her way to the lake, if by another route. Susan found herself unable to explain the feeling that she had for Mircalla, the mixture of mental and physical ecstasy she had felt at the sight of the other girl's body.

She arrived at the lakeside and waited hopeful again for the other girl. It was quite light here and she could see the moon

reflected dazzlingly on the water. She looked up and, on the mountainside, she could see the looming silhouette of the castle as it seemed to guard the valley and lake through the night.

At last Susan could wait no longer. She slid out of her robe and slipped into the cool, welcoming water. She splashed around for a few minutes, enjoying the feel of the water on her naked limbs, then turned to the bank as she heard a rustling in the bushes and a figure appeared.

"Mircalla – is that you?"

The figure made no answer and Susan, suddenly frightened that she had been caught, began to make her way back towards the bank. She had almost reached it when the figure undid its robe, let it slip off, then dived into the water to swim towards her. It was the other girl.

"Mircalla. Where have you been. I went across the yard, but when I looked back for you, you weren't there."

The other girl laughed.

"I thought I heard something round the side of the building. I went to see."

Susan giggled.

"That was probably poor old Giles. He's always creeping around the place, trying to catch us without any clothes on – did you see anyone."

"No."

Susan laughed, grabbed the other girl by the hair and ducked her. Mircalla replied in kind, then they trod water as they had a mock tussle. The feel of the Austrian girl's naked body against hers produced a renewed feeling in Susan that she could not understand, and she became frightened. Breaking away, she made for the bank.

"It's time to go back," she sighed.

"All right. But we will come again tomorrow night?"

Susan dragged herself out of the water, shivering, and put on the towelling robe. It had got quite cold. She had been in the water longer than she had planned. As she helped Mircalla out and looked at the gleam of water on her smooth skin in the moonlight, she found herself saying, in a voice strangely unlike her own:

"Yes, we will come again tomorrow."

Richard went for a solitary walk through the village. He had risen late, after a night that had been spent tossing and turning

in his bed, his thoughts torn between the beauty of Mircalla, and the tragedy of Trudi's mysterious death. Now, weary and bad-tempered, he returned to the inn for lunch. He had no desire for convivial company, and could see that neither the landlord nor the villagers were in the mood to give it. The men sat around sipping their drinks with gloomy faces, and they favoured Richard, whose face was as long as their own, with a brief nod in return for his own.

He went up to the bar and the landlord leant across it, his own face a reflection of his customers' :

"Will you be lunching, sir?"

Richard shrugged.

"I suppose so."

The landlord leant further across the bar and pointed to a table in the corner, occupied by a solitary stranger, a red-cheeked young man with a wisp of moustache.

"There's a gentleman, travelled all the way from England, like yourself, seated there."

"Well, for heaven's sake, don't put me with him," snapped Richard.

But he was too late. The other man had seen his glance and had risen and was advancing on the bar.

"He's been looking forward to meeting you," whispered the landlord with an apologetic sigh. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't realize . . ."

The newcomer had reached them.

"Good day to you, sir. Won't you join me." The voice was pitched a little high for the comfort of Richard's ear, but he felt ashamed at his surliness. The man was, after all, a stranger, and could not be expected to know of the tragedy of the night before.

Richard nodded a reluctant acceptance, glared a last look of displeasure at the landlord, then walked over to a table, the other man following in his wake. As Richard sat down, he thrust out a thin, cold hand.

"Biggs, sir. Arthur Biggs."

Richard held the limp cold hand briefly.

"How do you do. My name's –"

Biggs cut him off abruptly.

"I know, sir, I know. And I was so delighted to discover that you are a guest here. I have read every one of your books, and have found them all delightful."

"Really?" Richard found it hard to summon up any enthusiasm. A remark like that was usually a prelude to a gruelling lecture on the manner in which his writing talents would be better employed. "That's very kind of you."

Biggs leant forward as if to impart some terrible secret that must be kept from the rest of the world.

"As I said, I enjoy them, sir, and – well, I write myself."

Richard made an effort to be polite.

"Do you? I don't believe I've read any of your work."

The man slapped his knee and seemed amused by the admission.

"That would be because nothing of mine has yet been published. My style is what the French are given to calling *avant garde*."

"Well, it can be very difficult to get established . . ."

"I live in hope, sir. Somewhere there must come enlightenment." He paused, as if a great idea had just come to him. Richard knew exactly what it was, could almost mouth the words with him when they came.

"Perhaps you would be good enough to read something of mine, if you have the time."

Richard did his best to look enthusiastic.

"Yes, I'd be delighted, but I am rather busy for the moment, and I expect you will be moving on quite shortly."

Biggs quieted what he took to be Richard's fears with a raised palm.

"No, that is all right. I shall be staying in this locality. At Miss Simpson's school, I –"

Richard sat up at once, suddenly really interested in the newcomer for the first time. Biggs backed away in alarm at the vehemence of the reaction.

"At the school?"

"Why, yes. I take this work, of course, only to finance my literary endeavours."

He was aware that Richard was looking at him with a fierce intensity and he wilted under the gaze.

"Then you must be the new teacher of English literature."

Biggs gave a nervous smile.

"I preach what I – er – cannot practice."

Richard's mind was working fast now. Perhaps here was his chance to get into the school. He rose abruptly and stretched out his hand for a renewed greeting.

"My dear sir. Forgive me, to be sure. I did not know that you were *The* Arthur Biggs."

"Uh?" The man was too dazed to make adequate reply.

"I would be more than delighted to read some of your work," said Richard heartily. He leant forward, as the other man had done and dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Perhaps we could even collaborate on – something?"

Biggs looked stunned with delight at the prospect.

"Collaborate?"

"Yes, indeed." Richard was improvising fast. "I'm thinking of a new novel at the moment – but it's going to take a great deal of research, and I haven't the time just at the moment – it would mean going to Vienna."

Biggs smiled broadly. It did nothing to improve his distasteful appearance.

"I could go this very day, if you wish it."

"But your job."

Once again, the hand was raised to sweep away the objection like a piece of dust.

"Let them find someone else. There is nothing more important than to follow wherever one's muse leads."

Outwardly Richard was all good-humoured gratitude; inwardly he shuddered.

"His leg?" Miss Simpson looked up from her desk, and Richard, sitting in the hard chair opposite her, squirmed uncomfortably under her gaze.

"Yes, poor chap. He broke it in three places. Nothing he could do to save himself. Very sad."

Miss Simpson rubbed her hands together.

"No doubt . . . no doubt. But highly inconvenient at this time, just the same. Can he get around on sticks."

Richard sighed and shook his head.

"No, it's more serious even than that. He's had to go away for a tricky operation. They've taken him to Vienna for it – only place, outside of England."

Miss Simpson unclasped her hands, and drummed her fingers impatiently on the desk top.

"Then when will he be back here?"

Richard thought for a moment, non-plussed. He had never broken his own leg, so he took a wild guess at how long it would take to mend.

"Four weeks at least."

"Four weeks. But I cannot be without an English teacher for that long. What shall I do?"

Richard leant forward and produced his most comforting, helpful smile.

"That's where I come in, Miss Simpson."

"You?"

"When I saw poor Arthur off to Vienna, I told him he would not have to worry about a thing. I would take his classes until he returned."

Miss Simpson began to simper, an experience that Richard had endured the day before with little relish.

"Are you sure, Mr. Lestrange I would not like to take you away from the pleasure of your holiday."

Richard leapt forward gravely.

"Let me assure you, Miss Simpson, that nothing would give me greater pleasure than to come to the aid of yourself and your young charges."

Richard took his first class with the girls later that same afternoon, and found the experience a delight. As he walked back to the inn in the cool of the evening, he made a mental note that he must get hold of Giles in the morning and enquire as to whether or not he might move up to the school to stay. He grinned to himself as he thought how convenient it would be – the distance he would save in travelling, that should do the trick.

He frowned as his thoughts turned to the girls, and in particular to Mircalla, who fascinated him. That afternoon, he had given the girls a lecture covering the whole period of English literature he would like them to study. For the early part of the lecture, he was flattered and pleased to see that Mircalla kept her eyes intently on his, and seemed to follow and understand all that he said. But when he came up to more modern times, she lost interest and began to look out of the window instead of attending to her studies.

"And so we come to the nineteenth century novel, when, at long last, this comparatively new form began to equal the power and grace of the age old forms, the play and the epic poem."

He had paused to look at the girl, who was staring out of the window, and then, seeing that the struggle to regain her

attention from the rostrum would be an impossible one, he walked down to her desk.

"Mademoiselle, perhaps you could tell us which contemporary novelists you prefer."

Mircalla had raised her dark eyes to weave their magic spell on him.

"I'm afraid that I don't know any."

"Come, you must do. German, if not English."

"No." She seemed upset to displease him, then she smiled and added: "But I have read a great deal of eighteenth-century work."

The other girls giggled, all but Susan, who was watching Mircalla and Richard with what the latter noticed was a strange intensity, almost a jealousy.

Richard looked sternly round the room to silence the gigglers, then turned back to Mircalla:

"Your education seems to have been sadly neglected."

"I'm sorry." The girl looked close to tears, and Richard felt like an unfeeling swine.

"Never mind. I will just have to give you some personal tuition."

This time the giggling of the other girls was not to be silenced by a stony glance. Richard prayed he was not blushing as he remounted the rostrum:

"All right. You're all so well-read. Let's see just how much the rest of you know."

Richard's frown disappeared and he started to whistle. For he was remembering with tenderness the look of shame that Mircalla had given him when he had chided her. If only, he thought, it means that she feels a little for me, of what I feel for her.

The next morning, Richard rose late, for he knew that Giles was taking the girls in history, and he would not be needed for classes until the afternoon. He went for a long walk by the lake, determined to reach the school and make his inquiries as to accommodation at the luncheon break.

His walk would not have been so pleasant had he been aware that Mircalla was having a similar effect on Giles to the effect she had on him.

The girls were bored by the history lesson. Giles' lectures

were always dry and boring, and read rather than spoken with any feeling. But today, he was talking about a history of Styria, and his attention was directed to just one pupil – Mircalla.

The other girls were free to buff their nails or look out of the window as they chose, for Giles' eyes, behind his thick glasses, were fixed on Mircalla, who was returning the interest intently:

"... The latter part of the fifteenth century was not a particularly well-documented period. We are, in fact, woefully short of records for that time. However, we do at least know that, during that period while Styria was still a powerful, vigorous farming and fighting province, Karnstein Castle was built."

He paused, happy that Mircalla was leaning further forward at her desk, her mouth slightly open as she followed every word he spoke. He felt a shiver of pleasure at the sight of her, hanging on his words:

"The Karnstein family has a most curious history, not all of it recorded, by any means, as –"

He broke off suddenly as the bell rang to announce that class was at an end. Inwardly cursing, he said:

"All right girls, you may have half an hour of recreation in the open air, then it will be time for lunch."

He came down from the rostrum and looked round for Mircalla but saw that the girl was already making for the door, in company with Susan, the American girl. They were talking quietly, cooking something up between them, and Giles felt uncomfortable about drawing attention to his feelings by interrupting them. Instead, he marched briskly into the corridor, and ran into Richard, who was staring into the room, and towards the french windows, out of which the girls were pouring onto the terrace.

"Good morning, Richard, and how are you?"

"The very man," smiled Richard vaguely, his eyes still on the windows. "I was wondering – can you ask Miss Simpson if I might have accommodation at the school. It is very inconvenient coming too and from the village."

Giles chuckled and dug Richard in the ribs:

"Come now, you are transparent. Don't fool with me, I am not a blind man."

Richard blushed, suddenly afraid that his feelings for Mir-

calla had been discovered. He was relieved when Giles chuckled again and went on:

"Janet Playfair had a word with Miss Simpson on your behalf after breakfast, you sly dog. I think she wants to see you now."

"Who, Janet?"

"No," laughed the other. "Miss Simpson."

He went off down the corridor, still chuckling, and Richard turned and almost ran into Miss Simpson. He sent up a mental prayer that Giles had not been overheard.

"Mr. Lestrange."

"Yes . . ."

"I am pleased to see you taking such an interest in all the activities of the school. Miss Playfair speaks very highly of your enthusiasm."

"Oh," awkwardly. "Oh, yes."

"I understand that you wish to become a resident here?"

Richard assumed his serious, trustworthy expression:

"I did think it might be a good idea, if it is at all possible. Spend more time with the girls – marking and watching their work and so forth," he added lamely.

To his surprise, Miss Simpson's face cracked into a smile of approval:

"Very well. I will show you to your room."

"Thank you."

He had just time to mutter the words as Miss Simpson brushed past him and began to march quickly down the corridor. He followed in her wake, walking fast to catch up.

To his intense disappointment they crossed the hall, ignoring the stairs and plunged down another corridor that ended in an outside door leading to the yard and the stables. As Richard followed her out into the yard, he could not keep himself from saying:

"Not in the school?"

Miss Simpson turned, a hint of suspicion in her face:

"Of course not."

"But it is near the building, I mean in case anything should happen . . .?"

For an answer, Miss Simpson pointed at the stable block:

"It is excellent accommodation, and in the lofts there. I have had them converted. You will be sharing with Mr. Barton, Giles."

Richard managed a weak smile:
"Delightful, quite delightful."
Inwardly, he seethed with frustrated anger.

After his lesson that afternoon, Richard walked back to the village, collected his things, then hired a driver and trap to bring them back to the school. He was settled in to his new quarters by the time it got dark.

The room was large, but during his short stay, Giles Barton had contrived to fill it from top to bottom with clutter. On one side of the room, there were two comfortable beds, and this was the only clear part of the layout. Giles had set up a desk on the far side of the room, and it was surrounded by piles of books, most of them older than the two men, their pages marked with pieces of paper for reference.

On the walls were pinned a series of ancient maps and charts, each one marked with mysterious hieroglyphics that Giles had put on them at some time or another. The rest of the space was given over to more books, and piles of yellowing faded parchment rolls.

Richard and Giles took a light, and very dull supper together, while Miss Simpson and Janet Playfair took their evening meal with the girls. It was almost a relief for Richard to retire to the room and lie on top of his bed, thinking of how close and yet how far from Mircalla he was, while Giles sat at the desk and busied himself with his researches.

Giles had opened a huge ledger and was scratching notes in it as he looked through documents, muttering to himself. He went into a sudden fit of noisy coughing. Without removing his gaze from the ceiling above his bed, Richard said:

"It's all the dust from those old books does that to you. Where on earth did you dig them all up from."

Giles reddened and spluttered dangerously as he tried to bring his cough under control for long enough to reply:

"What? Books? Very important to me."

"Why," asked Richard, not really caring. "What are they all about."

"Histories, research material."

"Research into what?"

"Karnstein Castle. It has a fascinating history, just fascinating."

The chair scraped as he pushed it back from the desk and

rose, rubbing the back of his neck. Richard yawned, then:

"I know what you're after."

Had he turned his head to see Giles' guilty start, he might have become more interested at once:

"What?"

"You're training to be a vampire." Richard changed the yawn into a smile.

Giles' laugh rang hollow with relief:

"Ha, you've been listening to the gossip of the old men in the village."

Richard shook his head and sighed deeply, frowning as he remembered the tragedy of the inn.

"It's not all gossip, there may be some truth behind it at that."

"Stuff and nonsense," snorted Giles. "This is the nineteenth century not the middle ages."

"Even so –"

"Listen," said Giles. "I'm a historian, not a witch doctor. These people have always believed in the superstitions of their ancestors. They have not had the blessings of civilization. The modern world has passed them by."

Richard was about to reply to this, when Giles added, with a yawn of his own:

"Anyway, I can't stand talking here all night. I'm going out for a breath of fresh air."

Richard took his gaze from the ceiling, swung his legs onto the floor and stood up:

"Hang on a minute. I think I'll come with you. I could do with some fresh air myself."

But Giles was already gone, leaving the door open behind him. After a moment Richard followed him, but when he reached the yard, it was empty.

He made no further attempt to look for his roommate, but walked round the side of the house onto the terrace. The building was silent and in darkness. He walked to the steps and then out onto the lawn.

He was half-way across when it happened, and he heard a scream – the same scream that he remembered from the night at the inn when Trudi had died. But this time it came from further away, as if from beyond the stables, perhaps down by the lake.

Richard moved to the trees that skirted the stables and lawn

and led to the lakeside. Then, on the edge of the lawn, he froze as he heard someone running towards him through the undergrowth.

CHAPTER THREE

It was during the break between the history lesson and lunch that Mircalla had suggested to Susan that they go swimming down by the lake that night. Susan was pleased and mollified by the idea, as, the night before, on retiring, she had excitedly reminded Mircalla of her promise only to have the other girl refuse, claiming that she was too tired. When Susan had pointed out that it had been a promise, the other girl had become angry and had threatened to tell Janet Playfair of their original escapade.

Now, with lights out long past, the two girls stuffed their beds with pillows in case anyone should look in on them, and slipped out of the house by the side door. There was a light on in the loft of the stables, and Susan could see Giles standing near the window, talking to someone, probably Mr. Lestrange, the attractive new English master. As they flitted across the yard Susan felt sure that they hadn't been seen.

They went down the path through the trees until they came to the lakeside, then Susan said:

"A little way along there's a boathouse. We'll be safer there, no chance of anyone seeing us."

Mircalla had nodded and smiled in the moonlight, and the two girls skirted the lake until the boathouse loomed up out of the darkness.

They went inside, and slipped out of their robes in silence, Susan greedily inspecting Mircalla's hard lean body in the gloom. Then they both slipped out and into the water. For a while they played together in the shallows, Susan thrilled as her body touched the other girl's in the water. Then Mircalla swam off strongly into the lake. Susan tried to follow but she was too slow and anyway, she was beginning to feel the cold. She left the other girl to it, and swam back to the edge of the lake. She got out and went back into the boathouse to try to dry herself off before getting back into her robe.

She was still naked when the boathouse door opened, and she looked up in alarm and began to cover herself, then re-

laxed and smiled. She dropped the robe and stood for a moment quite naked and still, then, with her arms raised, she moved towards the newcomer who stood in the doorway. Strong arms enveloped her and she shivered and caught her breath with pleasure as she felt the touch of a cool hand on her small breasts. She could feel her nipples tighten with excitement, and her back arch to press her into the other body.

The hand stroked down from her breasts across her stomach, pausing briefly at the navel, then plunged further still to rest between her opened thighs. Susan had experienced no pleasure like it in her life before, and she threw her head back in ecstacy, her eyes closing as the hand caressed and stroked her.

She felt the breath on her cheek as the other face came slowly forward, and waited expectantly for the kiss.

It never came. Instead, she felt the mouth against her neck, then the beginnings of pain as the teeth plunged into the fair skin. She opened her eyes wildly, tried to struggle back, but it was too late. As Susan Pelly died, her scream echoed round the old boathouse. Then her body fell, and for a while there was no sound but the lap of the water at the lake's edge, and the gulping noises as the undead creature sated itself on Susan's life blood, before turning and leaving the boathouse as silently as it had come.

Richard tensed as he watched the figure come to the edge of the trees. Then he straightened and gasped in surprise. It was Mircalla, her wet blonde hair straggling behind her, her robe loosely tied, a strange panic about her body and in her eyes. He stepped forward in her path, and she stopped with a jerk:

"Mircalla."

For a moment he thought the girl was going to faint, and he reached forward and caught her. But she stood her ground, shaking with fear and silent.

Richard felt totally inadequate now that the dream he had dreamed for the past two days was presented to him. Perhaps it was the girl's very vulnerability that made him hesitate. Whatever it was, the moment was lost, and he said lamely:

"Forgive me for calling you by your first name, but –"

The words seemed to waken the girl from her daze of fright:

"I must go . . ."

She tried to struggle out of his grasp, but he held her firm in his arms:

"No, you must let me finish. I called you by your first name because it has magic for me. Please don't go, not yet."

As he spoke, he let go of her, and she began at once to hurry off. He chased her and grabbed her by the wrist. She stopped and he shivered as her dark eyes stared into his. Then :

"Listen, Mircalla. I don't know why you're here, or indeed why I am, but perhaps there really is a fate, or some star that shines down on lovers . . ."

As he said the word "lovers", Mircalla stopped struggling and stared at him, consternation on her face. He was in full flight now and nothing would have shut him up :

"In the last two days, I've tried a hundred times to contrive to be alone with you, without ever once succeeding. I only wandered out here in case I might see you, to speak to you, because I love you."

Mircalla's eyes closed on the last words, as if the sound of them was painful to her. She tried once more to pull away, but Richard, completely carried away by his ardour, refused to let her go. As she pressed her free hand against his chest, he grabbed her by the other wrist, so that she was held, defenceless.

"Forgive me," panted Richard. "But I must tell you. Please let my heart share its secret with you, at least. For I have loved you since the very first moment I saw you. I thought that I had lived before, but now I know that, before I set eyes upon you, I was dead."

Again, Mircalla reacted angrily at the words, tried to pull away, but to no avail.

"I was born in that moment." Richard was ecstatic with his own passion. "I have only lived since. With this new feeling, with the pain of loving – for the first time truly, I swear . . ."

He was silent, out of breath at last. His eyes were closed, he was contained within the passion of his own thoughts. Into the silence, Mircalla's voice dropped harshly, like a douche of cold water :

"Will you please let me go."

Richard's eyes snapped open, slightly bewildered. He looked down to his hands gripping the girl's wrists, then let her go, his arms dropping to his sides. He felt suddenly very foolish, like a schoolboy with a crush on a girl older than himself. As he looked at Mircalla he felt that despite her youth, she was older than he could ever be. He blushed and mussed his hair with one hand :

"I say . . . I'm sorry . . ."

Mircalla smiled and her eyes caught his. For a fraction of a second there seemed to be a gleam in them, directed specially at him, a hint that perhaps she felt as he did, but that now was neither the time, nor here the place, to show it.

"Good night." Her voice was soft this time, the harshness gone out of it. He watched stupidly as she went slowly across the lawn, up the steps to the terrace, along it and round the side of the building where she vanished from sight.

He still stood staring at the corner of the building until long after she had disappeared. He felt shocked and embarrassed by his own behaviour, and, at last, he shook his head:

"Richard Lestrange," he said out loud to himself. "You are going off your head. You've never behaved like this before in your life."

Slowly, he crossed the lawn and went round the side of the building to the stables. The door was still open as he and Giles had left it, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

The way he was feeling, he would not welcome even the silent company of the other man, and he hoped to be in bed and asleep by the time the other night wanderer returned.

He undressed and washed his face in cold water quickly, and went to bed. For a long time, he stared up at the ceiling, thinking about his meeting with Mircalla, and for the first time it occurred to him to ask himself just what she was doing there at that time of night, and soaking wet, too. The memory of the animal scream had faded completely from his mind.

He did not remember later how long it was before he faded away into sleep. Only later did he recall that Giles had still not returned.

Crouched near the boathouse, Giles saw the flash of white as Mircalla ran from it and up the path towards the school. He waited for a while longer, then moved forward to the half-open door.

Cautiously, he went inside and straightened up to look round. It was only on his second complete circuit that he saw Susan's naked body lying in the shadow of one of the boats, uncovered, one arm raised as if to ward off some frightening blow.

Giles went cautiously forward, the sound of his heart-beats pounding in his ears as the blood roared through his veins. He

looked down at the dead girl, then felt a wave of nausea as he saw the dried blood at the wounds in her neck.

He sat down on the boat, and put his head between his knees to fight off the feeling of dizziness. When he considered that he was recovered enough, he stood up and, finding Susan's robe, he draped it over the body, before picking it up by the armpits and starting to struggle with the dead weight towards the door.

He laid her on the grass outside the boathouse, then went back inside to check that no signs of the struggle remained. There were a few drops of blood from her neck on the floor, and these he covered with shavings from a pile neatly swept up by some boat repairer, from recent work.

Giles went back outside and closed the door carefully behind him. He looked down at the body, debating what he should do with it, where it would remain safely hidden. At last, an idea struck him, and he bent down and picked the girl up. The robe began to slip away and he hurriedly replaced it.

She was heavier than he had imagined possible, and it took him a long time to stagger up the path to the school, and reach his planned hiding place, the old dried-up well behind the stables. There were no windows on that side of the stable building and he knew he would be safe from Richard Lestrange's prying eyes. The walls were thick too, so no sound would be heard.

Giles put the body by the side of the well, and sat down to rest for a while and recover his breath. He had had no time to consider the consequences of what had happened and what he was now doing, and he banished all thought of them from his mind now. He was sweating profusely in spite of a cooling breeze off the lake, and he mopped his brow with his handkerchief before turning his attention to the well.

The rope that had once held the bucket was still in place, wound round the cross-beam above the well-head, and still looked strong and serviceable, Giles noted, before realizing in his confused mind that he had no need for that now.

Slowly, he removed the wooden top from the well, so that it fell away to one side with a minimum of noise. Then he lifted the body and half-carried, half-dragged it over the parapet of the well.

He held it there for a moment, to once more recover his breath, then pushed it over the edge. The body of Susan Pelly

fell with a sickening thud to the dry floor of the well, nearly a hundred feet down.

Giles sat down heavily, and endeavoured to calm himself. Recovered, he rose and began to walk to the yard, then remembered the well-cover and returned to slide it back into place, still sweating profusely from his exertion.

He looked around this time to make sure that there were no signs of either himself or the dead girl, then staggered wearily to the stables. He entered the room cautiously, but saw, despite the candles that still flickered, that Richard Lestrange was fast asleep.

Wearily, Giles Barton undressed and crawled into bed, determined to put all thought of the incident from his mind until the following day, when he might think more clearly, and decide upon the best course of action. He was asleep within seconds of his head touching the pillow, a nightmare of disturbed sleep, but sleep nonetheless.

The next morning, early, before either Richard or Giles had risen it was Mircalla who reported Susan's disappearance to Janet Playfair, the latter took the girl with her along to Miss Simpson in her office, while the other girls were having breakfast.

Miss Simpson listened patiently while Mircalla told of Susan vanishing during the night, leaving a pile of pillows in her bed.

Miss Simpson frowned:

"But she must have said something – given you some hint that she was going somewhere."

Mircalla shook her long, blonde hair:

"No, Mademoiselle. I thought that perhaps she was staying with some of the other girls in another room. I did not realize until this morning that she had not – had not come back."

"Are you quite sure she said nothing about going out," interposed Janet."

"Quite sure, Mademoiselle." She turned and favoured Janet with the sort of smile the latter had seen her use when she met Richard Lestrange, and the gym mistress averted her eyes abruptly. She was not going to be taken in by the charming innocence of any of the girls. She was young enough to remember what she had been like at school, herself.

Miss Simpson clasped her hands together and frowned. Then:

"All right, child."

Mircalla bobbed a curtsey and turned to the door. Her hand was on the handle when Miss Simpson called her back:

"Oh, Mircalla . . ."

She came back to the desk:

"Yes, Mademoiselle."

Miss Simpson forced her sour features into a smile:

"I am sure that this is some foolish prank which Susan is playing on us all. But, well, I don't want to alarm the girls. You understand?"

"Perfectly, Mademoiselle. I have told no one."

"Good." Miss Simpson beamed. The girl was obviously intelligent as well as well-born and bred. "Then don't tell anyone, for the time being, that is, of course. If anyone should ask you, then Susan is in the sanatorium – suspected measles."

Mircalla half-curtsied demurely:

"Yes, Mademoiselle."

This time she made the door without being called back again. As it closed behind her, the smile disappeared from Miss Simpson's face and she began a frantic kneading of her hands as her frown deepened. Janet walked briskly round the desk so that she was facing her employer. Her face was flushed, angry at the scene she had witnessed, the cover-up of the disappearance:

"Miss Simpson, a girl has disappeared. You can't really believe that it's just a joke?"

Miss Simpson shook her head wearily and clicked her tongue against her teeth with annoyance:

"Of course I don't, Miss Playfair – Janet. But there's no need for us to alarm the whole school at this stage."

"But what are you going to do. You can't just leave it like this?"

Miss Simpson opened her mouth, then hesitated. She had not given the matter much thought as yet. She said vaguely:

"Well, we'll just have to wait and see for a while . . . She may come back . . . I've had more experience than you with this kind of problem – some of these girls have very wild natures. They pick up with some man, and . . ."

Miss Simpson trailed away into silence. She was making a strong effort to convince herself, and was convincing Janet not at all. Janet snorted:

"Man? What man, Miss Simpson? We're miles from the village, and, apart from deliveries, the local people never come near here."

"Susan only joined the school a short while ago. We don't – can't know that she hasn't been followed here by some man . . ."

Janet sighed. There seemed to be no arguing with Miss Simpson's fertile yet protective imagination. She gave it one last try:

"That's ridiculous. Susan isn't that kind of girl at all. And, in any case, if she has been abducted – as you seem to be suggesting, then I think we should still inform the police."

Miss Simpson reddened:

"The police? Certainly not."

"But you must, surely?"

"I will not be told what to do in my own school." In the last resort, Miss Simpson fell back, as always, on the dignity of her position. She was silent for a moment, recovering her control, when she spoke again, her voice was gentler:

"I did not say she had been abducted. I said that it might be an – an adventure. I'm sure that Susan will come back soon, of her own accord."

Janet sighed, despairingly:

"But if she doesn't?"

"Then I will report the incident."

"But when will you report it, Miss Simpson. How long will you wait before you consider the child in some danger?"

Miss Simpson rose:

"Janet. I must ask you to bear with me. You may be sure that I know my responsibilities – to Susan – and to all the other girls – but remember that I have other responsibilities as well. The school, my life's saving have gone into it – it represents my whole future. I can't throw it all away, create some silly scandal, when there might be a perfectly logical answer as to why Susan has vanished, isn't that possible?"

She seemed to be begging for the answer she wanted, and Janet found it hard not to give it to her. Instead, she spoke with equal firmness:

"Very well, Miss Simpson. We'll wait forty-eight hours, but for no longer. Because – if you don't report it then, I will."

Janet marched straight to the door, and slammed it hard behind her. Miss Simpson resumed her seat. The image of purposive efficiency drained from her, leaving an ageing woman, frightened and alone to worry away at her problems.

That morning, Richard took an English class. He was nervous

that Mircalla might have reported her conversation with him on the lawn to Miss Simpson, but the old dragon did not seem to be in evidence. He was puzzled by a muting in the atmosphere, and, when Janet passed him in the corridor after breakfast, and he greeted her with a joviality that he found hard to summon, she all but ignored him.

The class was quiet too. Mircalla was in her place as usual, and returned his stare levelly, giving no hint of what had passed between them. There were twenty girls at the school, all young ladies, but he noticed that one desk was empty, the desk of Susan Pelley, the American girl.

"Where is Miss Pelly?"

It was Mircalla who rose. She gave a half-curtsey and a respectful smile:

"If you please, Sir. She is sick – suspected measles."

"Thank you, Mademoiselle. I do not please, but there's nothing we can do about that, is there?"

The class echoed him to a girl.

After lunch, it was Giles' turn to take the girls, and, instead of tying them to the classroom, he announced that he was taking them up to the old cemetery that lay on the hillside below the castle. He wanted to show them, as he put it, some history on the spot.

He walked up the path with the girls, beaming in a fatherly way as they screamed and giggled around him. If he had any memory of the events of the night before, they had slipped out of his mind. If anything, he looked well-rested, and his face showed a healthier colour, was more flushed than usual, as if he was excited, rather than afraid.

Once in the old cemetery, its gravestones crooked with the passing of the years and covered with lichens till many of them were unreadable, he allowed the girls to play for a while, then he climbed on top of one of the old stone tombs and ordered them to gather round him. He was gratified to note that Mircalla stood in the centre of the group, one of the girls closest to him.

He began to lecture the girls:

"The history of Karnstein Castle traces back well beyond the Middle Ages. Incidents concerning the Karnstein family, and connecting them with this valley, have been recorded since as early as the twelfth century, a few even earlier."

The bored, glazed look that greeted most of Giles' lectures came over the girls now – all but Mircalla, who was looking up at him with deep interest. Giles was gratified by her enthusiasm, but determined to instil it in some of the other girls as well. He jumped down from the tombstone :

"Look, I'll give you some examples. Let us look at some of the tombstones, and see what we can decipher."

The girls, glad of the break, scattered and pretended a minute inspection of some of the stones, ones that could not possibly be read any more. Giles himself went looking in earnest. Then, with a shout, he called the girls to regroup round him :

"Now here we have an interesting example."

He knelt down and peered at the almost obscured lettering. It was a long time before he looked round, but, when he did so, he was looking directly at Mircalla through his thick pebble glasses :

"It seems to be the tomb of a young Karnstein Countess, one Carmilla. As far as I can make it out, she was born in 1688, and seems to have died in 1710."

As he stared at her, Mircalla's expression did not change, it seemed to mean nothing to her.

A girl at the back of the group giggled, then asked :

"Isn't that a bit young, Sir?"

With an effort, Giles dragged his eyes away from Mircalla and stared in the direction from which the voice had come :

"Young? No, not for those days. Disease, you know. Probably a victim of the plague. It swept through Styria at about that time, I think."

Once again, a glance at Mircalla, once again a blank stare in return. Giles got up off his knees. He was beginning to feel a little foolish :

"This grave, like the others as you can see, has been somewhat neglected, I fear."

Another of the girls asked :

"Aren't any of the Karnstein family still living?"

Again, Giles shot a glance at Mircalla :

"So far as is known, no. They died out completely shortly after the date on this tomb."

This time, there were no more questions, and, after waiting a moment in case, Giles said :

"Carmilla – the name on that grave – an unusual name, you might think?"

"Yes, Sir," answered a chorus of the girls, dutifully, before waiting for a contradictory pronouncement, which they knew was coming.

"Not really, though, you know. During that period it was the fashion for a child to be given the anagram of her mother's name, or some other female relative. Let me see now, it could have come from – what?"

Isabel spoke first:

"Marcilla."

Another girl followed quickly with:

"Millarca." She then subsided into a fit of giggles, which were followed by a blank silence.

It was then that Amanda stepped forward. She glanced at Mircalla, then frowned and looked at Giles:

"What about Mircalla, Sir?"

Giles stared directly at her, as the other girls all added their looks to his. They all laughed, but Mircalla maintained her expression of blank calm.

Giles spoke at last:

"It is possible that the Herritzen family is related to the Karnsteins in some way. Do you know if this is by any chance so, Mademoiselle."

Mircalla's answer was immediate, definite and monosyllabic:

"No."

Giles sighed. She was not to be drawn here, that was for certain:

"Well, I shall pursue my researches and undoubtedly I will eventually know for sure. I suggest that we go over to the castle itself now – it has a most fascinating history."

He began to lead the girls up to the castle entrance, talking all the time as he went:

"The castle is intriguing, principally, not for what is said about it, but for much of what is left unsaid – the villagers, for example, have the most extraordinary stories, both about the castle, and its inhabitants – much of it is silly superstition, of course, but then these people live on such local tales."

All the time he spoke, he was glancing at Mircalla, who appeared now to show no more interest than the other girls. As they reached the gateway that separated the cemetery from the castle grounds, he stepped aside to let the girls pour through, then caught Mircalla by the arm to stop her passing with the rest. None of the other girls noticed, as she hung back beside

him, and as soon as the others were out of earshot, he said quietly:

"Mircalla – meet me tonight – here – it is very important."

Mircalla did not look up at him. She shuffled unhappily, then said:

"I cannot, Sir. There are the rules of the school. Lights out is at ten o'clock."

"That rule did not bother you last night – nor Susan Pelly."

The girl gasped, paled and put her hand to her throat:

"You saw me – last night?"

Giles did not answer directly. There were beads of sweat on his forehead as he snapped:

"I have found something out. You must come."

The girl broke away from him and hurried after the others. Giles watched her go, then mopped the sweat from his brow:

"You must come," he muttered. "You must."

Richard spent the whole of the rest of the day in misery. Everything in the school seemed muted, and he was given the cold shoulder by all the staff from Miss Simpson downwards. This, coupled with the embarrassment he still felt as he remembered his behaviour with Mircalla on the lawn the night before, was making him feel pretty low.

After dinner, he walked briskly to the village, drank a countless number of the huge glasses of the rough local wine at the bar, then returned to the school, a couple of bottles of schnapps under his arm, which he intended to consume in bed – Giles or no Giles.

When he entered the room above the stables, he staggered over to his bed, unmindful of the fact that Giles was bent low over his researches.

He sat in silence for a while, swaying, then opened one of the bottles and took a large swig of the heady brew. He belched and shouted:

"Bloody schoolmaster – that's a ridiculous occupation don't know why a man does it – do you, Giles?"

There was a silence, broken only by the continued scratching of Giles' pen on the page of the huge ledger. Richard got angry when he failed to answer:

"I spoke to you, man. Said being a bloody schoolmaster was a stupid waste of time – whaddya say."

Giles sighed and lay down his pen. Obviously, he would get no peace until he had said something to placate the drunk man. He hoped this was not going to happen too often. Richard Lestrange might be a best-selling author and the son of a peer, but if he was a drunk, well . . .

"It has its rewards."

"Such as?"

Giles turned round, and eyed the bottle that Richard was swigging :

"Okay, so they're not always clearly visible. That I'll admit – I say, you'd better go steady with that bottle."

Richard laughed and waved aside the warning – with the hand holding the bottle. Giles squeaked and leant back in alarm :

"That's all right, my friend. Keeps me fit, does this stuff."

He glared at the bottle for a moment, then frowned at Giles as he dredged up a question he had meant to ask from the back of his drink-fuddled mind :

"Oh, yes. I remember. One of my class wasn't there this morning – Susan Pelly – the American – one of the girls who frightened me that day at the castle, you remember – why wasn't she there?"

"Susan?" Giles shrugged, keeping his face a blank. "She has a touch of fever, I believe. She's in the sanatorium."

"Oh." Richard sank back onto the bed, then giggled. "I believe I have a touch of fever myself."

Giles smiled slightly as he got up and put his stool neatly under the desk :

"You'll get over it. If I may suggest it, a good long sleep would probably do you the world of good."

As he finished speaking, he took the bottle from Richard's unprotesting grasp and rested it carefully on the table.

"Yes," said Richard. "Good idea. Might just close my eyes for a few minutes – how about you."

"I think I've done enough work for one night," sighed Giles. "I think I'll just go out for a short stroll before I turn in."

Richard rose unsteadily :

"Good idea. Mind if I come with you."

Giles swore under his breath. He must get away from this drunkard and up to his meeting place by the castle. Despite her blank expression, Giles knew that Mircalla would come to

meet him there, was even more convinced after what he had found out that evening in the musty old books that were now atop his desk.

Aloud, he said:

"I don't think that would be a good idea, old chap. Night air, you know, might knock you out."

Richard subsided onto the bed. His legs wouldn't have taken him as far as the door anyway:

"Think I'll turn in. You're probably right, old boy."

"That's right," smiled Giles, as Richard grinned foolishly up at him. He took the bottle of schnapps from the table, and slipped it into a drawer of his desk. Then, after checking his inside pocket, he went quickly to the door.

As he went down the stairs to the stables, he heard Richard rise noisily:

"Hang on a moment, old chap, said I was coming with you."

Giles stopped, cursed and turned to remount the stairs. He had nearly reached the top when he heard a crash as Richard fell back onto his bed. When Giles stuck his head round the door, the other man was dead to the world.

"Thank God for that."

But it was not God whom he should have thanked for Richard's drunkenness as he hurried across the darkened lawn and up the moonlit path to the cemetery of Karnstein Castle. For Giles Barton M.A., young scholar, respected if prissy member of the teaching profession, was engaged, not in God's work, but in the work of the devil.

CHAPTER FOUR

The moonlight cast a bright enough light on the path for Giles to reach the cemetery quite quickly. Once there, and looking out over the tombstones in the eerie half-darkness, his nerve almost failed him, and for a moment, he debated whether or not to turn and run back to the safety of his own bed above the stables, drunken roommate or no.

But then his hand came into contact with the contents of his inside pocket, and his resolve was strengthened again, his fear receded, against the thought of the knowledge he would acquire that night.

He picked his way cautiously between the tombstones, towards the gateway, and the vast looming hulk of the ruined castle beyond. He waited for a while by the gate, but all was silence, no one appeared.

At last, bored with waiting, and his nervousness returning, he made his way back to the tomb that he and the girls had inspected that afternoon. He took a candle from his pocket, and lit it carefully with a match, shielding the flame from a non-existent breeze.

He knelt down and re-read the inscription. His hand touched the earth, and he noticed it was soft, as if it had been recently dug. He went excitedly to the grave next door to it, and tested the earth which proved hard and unyielding.

Giles placed the candle carefully on top of the tombstone and began to scrabble with the disturbed earth with his hands. Suddenly, he stopped, terrified, as a shadow came between him and the candle.

He braced himself and looked up at the newcomer, then his fear faded away, his frown turned to a smile as he saw Mircalla staring down at him.

Giles got to his feet, wiping his hands on his trousers:

"Yes, I knew you'd come," he whispered.

"You knew?" asked Mircalla softly.

"Yes, I knew. And you knew that you would have to as well didn't you. Because you guessed that I know everything."

"Everything?"

"I know who you are," shouted Giles. "And I know why you are here. That is what I found out – this afternoon."

Mircalla stared silently at him. Her face was expressionless. Only her eyes moved, following Giles' every gesture, compelling and hypnotic. He found himself held by her eyes. His face was flushed with his inner excitement. The words began to pour from him with an ease he had never been able to show in the classroom:

"It was here, this afternoon – at this grave. It was when I saw the name Carmilla. I wrote it down. I asked the others for their anagrams – you saw it Carmilla – Mircalla."

Still the girl's face showed no expression. Giles could feel himself sweating, but he did not mind that now, for it was the sweat of excitement, not of fear:

"I went back to my room, I checked all my histories of the area. I knew what I was looking for. I wanted to find a por-

trait of the last countess – the young Carmilla Karnstein."

Again he waited for some reaction, but none came, though he imagined he could detect a sudden slight wrinkling of the forehead, as if it was touched by the start of a frown, but he could not be sure in the flickering candlelight. He went on:

"You remember, she died in 1710. Just one hundred and sixty years ago. And when I had found it – and I did find it, Mircalla. The portrait of the last Countess Karnstein – do you know who the portrait was of? Do you?"

Mircalla moved for a fraction of a second, long enough to shake her head, but her eyes never left his now. Giles laughed hoarsely:

"It was of you – it was a portrait of you."

For a moment, his faith in his researches was shaken as a look of horrified disbelief swept over her face. She looked for a moment as if she would faint, then recovered and renewed her stare. Her face became expressionless once more.

"You," screamed Giles, reaching out and grabbing her arm. With a quick movement, and without moving the rest of her body, nor dropping her stare, she shook his hand off.

"You," screamed Giles again, excited beyond all reason.

This time Mircalla swayed and her eyes closed. It was only for an instant, but in that moment she saw again her mother and father standing over her coffin in the chapel, realized consciously for the first time the full horror of her own re-creation, then, abruptly, she was calm again, and had resumed her fixed stare.

Giles was calmer too. He was panting for lack of breath, and this had called a halt to his inane screaming. Quickly, he recovered himself and returned the girl's stare.

Mircalla smiled suddenly. It was an abrupt gesture, in many ways more frightening than her previous stillness. She took a pace towards Giles and raised one arm. He backed away, his face bright with expectation. The girl took another pace forward, and this time Giles reached into his inside pocket and produced the contents, a large wooden cross.

He placed it in both hands and held it up in front of him.

Mircalla screamed and covered her eyes with her arm as she reeled backwards from it. She crashed into a tombstone, and gripped it with her free hand to keep herself upright.

Giles laughed, a horrible sound torn in agony from his throat:

"Then you are indeed one of the undead – you are indeed a vampire."

He began to shake with fright, now that his discovery and supposition had proved correct. Muttering an incantation that he had read in one of the ancient books, he turned the cross, backwards and upside down, thus reversing it, and making it the cross of the black arts of the devil.

Mircalla, her eyes still shaded from the sight, turned to run further, but Giles shouted:

"No, there is no need to run. Please stay with me – I have reversed the cross – look. You have nothing to fear."

Mircalla was very still for a moment. Then she slowly let her arm fall, saw the reversed cross, and stood quite still once more, the same fixed stare on her face that he had held before the revelation.

Giles was wracked with a bout of coughing, but still he held the reversed cross up. Then he gasped in air and went on:

"You see how I have studied your magic. I know something of the black arts – and I want only to know more – much more. I meant to bring no harm to you – that I swear."

"What then do you want?" Mircalla's voice was harsh and hard, and seemed to come echoing from deep within her.

Giles was silent for a moment, as if overwhelmed by the enormity of what he was about to ask:

"I want only to worship you – I want only to be your servant for always."

The girl was quite still, her eyes blazing, holding his in their hypnotic spell so that he could not tear them away:

"I want to be your servant," whimpered Giles. "I want to be a servant of the Devil, to learn the arts of the Devil. I pray that you will show me the way."

As Giles watched her, Mircalla's face was suddenly transformed by a warm, welcoming smile:

"Then, my servant you shall be, if that is what you most desire."

She began to move slowly towards him, still keeping her eyes on his. He began to babble:

"He will accept me, of that I am sure. Oh, Mircalla, say to me that he will – and that you will."

The girl did not reply, but took another pace forward. In a moment, she would be able to touch him. He struggled to his feet and started to speak again:

"I have already proved my worthiness of you, that you know. I could have told all that I knew about you, but I stayed silent, for your sake as well as mine."

"That was good," whispered the girl.

"I found the body of the girl you killed. It was I that hid it, took it from the boathouse. I said nothing. I got rid of it myself, down the old well. I did it so there would be no immediate inquiry, so no one would discover too soon the manner of her death."

The girl nodded and again flashed her pleased smile:

"You did well, my darling, you must receive your reward."

"I will do whatever you desire, whatever you demand of me."

For answer, Mircalla stretched out her hand to him, and he fell on his knees as he reached to take it. The cross, still reversed, fell to the ground at her feet, and she stepped forward quickly to tread on it, and keep it in the reversed position. Giles took her hand and kissed it, before reaching forward and burying his face in the warmth of the robe hanging loosely at her thigh.

Mircalla smiled gently and began to stroke his hair. He recovered himself sufficiently to rise, still holding her. In a moment, they were face to face, and he could feel the hard swell of her breast against his hand.

Her head came forward and her lips brushed his. Then ran aside and touched his cheek, going ever lower – towards his unprotected neck.

At last her lips touched his neck, and she drew her head back, the better to strike. Giles accepted the attack, braced himself, knowing what he must do to become her lover.

As her fangs bit into his neck, he braced himself not to cry out at the exquisite pain. He could feel his blood welling up, his life being sucked out of him.

Then, after a moment, he realized what he had done, realized what might happen if she did not stop. He tried to pull away, but her teeth held him tight. He felt himself getting weak, the pain coming in great waves, then receding only to crash back again, the stronger.

A moment later, his legs gave way, and he could feel him self sliding down from her embrace, as she leant, still drinking from his neck. He began to reach out for the ground below, then fell in a heap as Mircalla stepped away from him and

wiped her blood-soaked lips with the back of her hand.

With a great effort, he turned his head to look up at her, his eyes crying salty tears behind the thick glasses. She was looking down at him, still smiling her strange smile of happiness, the smile with which she had taken him to her.

With an effort more of will than of physical strength, he raised himself far enough from the ground to begin to crawl towards her. His lips trembled as he tried to form a word, and, at last, he managed to croak hoarsely :

"Mircalla."

She stepped back a few more paces, still with the smile, still with the stare. As he dragged himself forward with painful slowness, his eyes failing to focus all the time, he managed to croak :

"Mircalla, I have kept my promise to you. Now it is your turn to keep your promise to me, for the love of . . ."

His voice trailed away as he realized with a faint irony that he had been about to say "God".

Had Mircalla been human as she looked down at the dying man she would have felt pity at that moment. For there was no hatred or anger in his face at his betrayal, only an expression of intense desire, of his besotted love.

His painful crawl forward had put him next to the tombstone of Carmilla Karnstein, and now he reached up, gripped it, and managed to crawl up it, till he was standing, swaying like a branch in a breeze :

"Don't go, please, Mircalla .... I only want to serve you, please, my beloved."

As the girl retreated once more, he let go of the tombstone and staggered forward a few paces, before collapsing once more at her feet. Even now, he was not done for. His hand reached out and stroked her ankle :

"Don't go, please don't go ... I love you, Mircalla, I love you . . ."

The voice trailed away as the weakness of death overtook him, overpowering even love :

"Please ... I beg of you ... Take me .. Where ... ever .. you are going . . ."

The hand slipped away from her ankle, pawed listlessly at the ground for a moment, then was still. Then, all at once, the head was raised :

"Mir . . . call . . . a . . ."

The last shout took the dying breath from the body of Giles Barton, and the head fell, askew from the body, exposing the jagged wound on his neck.

Mircalla knelt quickly to check that he was dead for sure, then turned and ran back down the moonlit path to the school and her bed, and a dreamless sleep.

The next morning, Richard Lestrange was awakened by the sound of an imperious banging on his door, and Miss Simpson's voice calling urgently for someone to answer.

He sat up in bed, his head feeling like a split pumpkin. The pain of movement was enough, and it made it only worse when Miss Simpson renewed her banging.

He put on his dressing-gown and opened the door:

"What is it, Miss Simpson?" he managed from his fur-lined throat. The sound of his own voice was hollow and squelchy, as if it had been dragged through glue between his larynx and the outside world.

Miss Simpson eyed him with disgust and suspicion, then pushed past him and looked round the room. Then:

"Where is Giles?"

"Where should he be?" asked Richard, holding his head.

"Don't be facetious, young man. He had a history lesson this morning, and he is gone – and I see his bed has not been slept in."

As she spoke, she looked at Richard accusingly, rather as if she suspected that it was his fault that Giles had disappeared. He felt that he had to say something:

"I haven't seen him since last night. I was just going to bed when he said that he would go out for a stroll before turning in."

"Well, really," snapped Miss Simpson. "This is just too much. There is no one can be trusted nowadays."

She bustled back to the door, then felled him with her parting shot:

"I would have asked you to fill in for Giles, but you do not appear to be in any condition to do so adequately. I will have to ask Miss Playfair to take an extra class."

She slammed the door behind her, and, in agony, Richard fell back onto the bed and closed his eyes for a few more minutes of peace.

But Miss Simpson's troubles for the day were only just beginning. She bustled back into the house and to Janet Playfair's room, only to discover that the gym mistress had gone out early, not knowing that she would be needed, and was presently engaged in walking round the lake.

Miss Simpson braced herself to take the only way out the situation warranted – short of actually taking a class herself. She gave the girls the morning off.

They greeted her announcement with an unbecoming joy, and dived for the french windows. Miss Simpson heard Amanda shout to some of the others:

"Let's run up to the castle."

Another girl replied:

"I know, let's see if we can read any more of Mr. Barton's silly tombs."

She sighed as she watched them go across the lawn and make for the path that led to the cemetery and the castle, then retired to her office, but not to settle down to any work. She was worried.

There had been no sign or word of Susan – Miss Simpson assumed that Janet was really engaged in a search for her, as indeed she was. Now Giles had disappeared, gone in just what he stood up in, as if the earth had opened to swallow him up. Perhaps there was a jinx on the school, perhaps she should never have moved from England at all.

The next blow was struck as Miss Carstairs, never one for the niceties of good behaviour, barged into the office without knocking and panted:

"Miss Simpson. outside. The Countess is here. Her coach has just arrived."

Miss Simpson took a moment to brace herself, then got up and walked with a deliberate calm she did not feel to the hallway and thus out to the drive. The Countess was just climbing out of her coach, being helped by a man who was still sitting in the semi-darkness behind her. Miss Simpson walked briskly across to help the Countess to the gravel:

"My dear Countess, this is an honour."

The Countess looked round as if expecting to see Mircalla with Miss Simpson. Only when she had assured herself that the girl was in fact not in evidence, did she say:

"Ah, Miss Simpson, I was on my way to Vienna, and I thought I would just drop by to see my niece."

"Ah," said Miss Simpson. "I'm afraid she's not here at the moment, she's –"

She stopped abruptly. Somehow it didn't seem right to announce to a countess that her niece and ward was in an ancient cemetery, playing, because half the school staff had disappeared, and those that were left were incapable of teaching – at least for the morning.

It was the Countess who got her off this hook, however:

"Perhaps it was wrong of me, Miss Simpson. After all, it cannot do any of the girls any good if they are constantly receiving visits from their families."

Miss Simpson was nothing if not quick at picking up the ball:

"Just so, Countess. We believe in teaching our girls to be independent both of us and their families. As a matter of fact, the girls are on a self-organised nature walk at this moment."

The Countess nodded, appearing to be satisfied:

"Then I will bid you good day, Miss Simpson."

She turned and began to climb back into the coach. The thin white hand of the man seated inside reached forward to help her, then both she and Miss Simpson froze and turned towards the house.

From beyond the house, and high up the hill, came the terrible sound of a scream – a shriek of girlish fear.

The Countess and Miss Simpson looked at one another, their minds filled with different emotions and questions of their own. Miss Simpson began to walk across the gravel to go through the building and onto the terrace. The Countess said to the occupant of the carriage:

"You stay there, my darling. I will call if Mircalla or I need you."

She stepped away from the coach and looked up at the driver, slouched on his box, still with the cloak round him as he always was:

"Gustav, come quickly – in case."

The Countess and her squinting servant ran round the side of the terrace to face the lawn.

The girls were streaming down the path onto the lawn. The Countess looked relieved when she saw that Mircalla was not among them, then smiled as she saw the girl step out of the school by the french windows, her face expressionless as the girls ran towards Miss Simpson, who was waiting for them on the lawn.

Amanda, who had screamed, was the first to reach her, and now she shouted :

"Miss Simpson. It's Mr. Barton. He's up there – in the cemetery, Miss Simpson."

"What do you mean, child? snapped the principal. "Pull yourself together and speak slowly."

Amanda grimaced, but Miss Simpson's sharp words had calmed her down. Whatever else she was, Miss Simpson knew how to handle young ladies.

"It's Mr. Barton, Miss Simpson. He's lying in the cemetery, near the grave he was looking at yesterday. He's dead, and his neck is all torn at the side."

This last piece of information was too much for the girl, who immediately burst into floods of tears. Miss Simpson left her with a group of the other girls and hurried back onto the terrace.

The Countess glanced sharply at Mircalla, whose face remained expressionless, then she turned to the coachman :

"Quick, Gustav, go up there and get the body, I will take care of things here."

The coachman smiled evilly, gave a wave that might or might not have been a salute, then hurried along the terrace and down the steps, not forgetting to start Amanda's nearly dry tears again, by favouring her with his evil smile as he went.

The Countess walked briskly over to Miss Simpson, who was standing on the terrace, looking from left to right in bewilderment totally unable to think straight and devise a plan of action.

"Miss Simpson, I suggest that you go to your office. You have suffered a great shock. I have sent my servant to get the body of your teacher, and, by great good fortune, my doctor happens to be travelling in the coach with me. I will fetch him now."

"Would you? Countess, I am most grateful. You are being most kind. If it is no trouble."

"Nonsense, Miss Simpson. What sort of people are we if we cannot help one another when we are in trouble."

The Countess turned to her niece :

"Mircalla, darling, will you help Miss Simpson to her office, she has suffered a great shock."

Mircalla, whose face still bore no expression, locked eyes for a moment with the other woman, then gave a bobbing curtsey :

"Of course, Aunt. Come with me, Miss Simpson. Shall I ask Miss Carstairs to make you some tea?"

"Would you, dear. That would be most kind of you."

The Countess turned on her heel so that Miss Simpson could not see her sneer. Tea. That was the English solution to every problem. Tea and more tea. How could such a little people know so much and have so much.

Miss Simpson sat at her desk, almost recovered from her ordeal thanks to the competence of the Countess and her doctor and the efficacy of three cups of hot strong tea.

The Countess sat opposite her, and the doctor stood by the side of the desk. Miss Simpson felt that her thoughts were uncharitable, but she was unable to suppress them. The doctor was very tall, with a thin bloodless face, that she thought might frighten many of his patients to death ; she knew she would not like that face to loom up at her bedside if she were really ill. With an effort, she brought her mind back to the horrors that were closer at hand.

Giles' body had been carried down from the cemetery single-handed, by the evil looking coachman. It now lay on the big table in Miss Simpson's drawing-room, next to the office. Miss Simpson felt that this was a most unsuitable resting place, but it was the only table large enough to contain the body, other than the kitchen and the girls' dining-room, and Miss Simpson felt that these places were even less suitable. The Countess had suggested the stables, but Miss Simpson felt it unchristian that the corpse of her old friend and partner should rest away from the house on its last night. The undertaker was due to arrive from the village first thing in the morning, and she would just have to keep out of her sitting-room till then.

Miss Simpson braced herself and looked into the doctor's coal-black eyes :

"Poor Giles – what could have happened – was it an accident?"

The doctor bowed :

"I will know for sure in a moment." His accent was quite thick, another mark against him in Miss Simpson's book. "I would just ask for a pen and ink, and then, when I have finished my examination, I can sign the certificate."

Miss Simpson handed him pen and ink, and shivered slightly as his ice-cold hands touched hers. A strange man for the Count-

ess to have as her personal physician.

He bowed out of the room with a murmur of thanks, and closed the door behind him. The Countess leaned forward, reassuringly:

"We will soon know, he is brilliant. It is most fortunate for all of us that I was travelling with my personal physician."

"Yes, indeed," simpered Miss Simpson, clasping her hands together. "So very fortunate. I am sure that if I had called in the local doctor, he would just gossip – and, well, one cannot afford to have a hint – the slightest hint – of scandal, at a place like this, you know."

The Countess nodded:

"There will be no scandal. He will see to that, never you fear, Miss Simpson."

The door re-opened and the doctor returned. The Countess looked up at him:

"Well?"

The doctor nodded briefly to the Countess, then turned to Miss Simpson and smiled, an action to which the latter reacted by instinctively putting her hand to her throat. With a smile on the long bloodless face, the doctor reminded her of a gargoyle she had once seen while taking a party of children round Lincoln Cathedral on an educational trip.

"It was a heart attack. Mr. Barton succumbed, and fell, gashing his neck on the edge of a tombstone."

He leant forward and placed the signed death certificate on Miss Simpson's desk.

"Thank you, doctor," she managed to gasp. "And my thanks to you, Countess."

The Countess rose:

"I said everything would be all right, Miss Simpson. And now, I must be on my way."

She made for the door, then turned:

"Oh, by the way. Would it be in order for me to see Mircalla for a moment, under the circumstances, after all, she knows I am here."

With an effort, Miss Simpson looked up from the illegible scrawl of the certificate:

"Oh, why yes, of course."

Richard did not have a happy day. Amanda's scream had finally put paid to his hangover, and he had been forced to put

mind over matter and get up. By the time he had dipped his head in cold water, shaved and dressed, the excitement was all over.

He stood on the terrace after lunch, a sombre meal, the girls hardly picking at their food – all but Mircalla, who ate heartily, with no expression on her face, and it was there that Amanda now over the worst of the shock, and luxuriating in her brief moment of fame, told him all about what she had found.

She did, of course, embroider it a little, but Richard knew how to make allowances for the tales of young ladies, and he managed to get the gist of what she had to say. It was the gashed neck that interested him the most, and, after Amanda had finally released him, had finally wrung the last ounce of drama that even she could manage from the tale, he went to Miss Simpson's office, to find the woman sitting listlessly in her chair.

"Good afternoon, Miss Simpson. I must apologise for this morning, a rare aberration, I assure you."

Miss Simpson shrugged uncharacteristically:

"What does it matter now, Mr. Lestrange. I am deserted on all sides. It is only a matter of time before the school closes."

"Nonsense." Richard used his heartiest tone, then regretted it almost at once. "You still have me – and Miss Playfair."

"For all I know, she could be dead, too. She went out this morning – before breakfast, nothing to eat, most unhealthy, and no one knows where she is, or when she'll be back."

Richard was surprised at the amount of anxiety he felt at the older woman's words. He snapped out of it at once:

"Miss Simpson – how did Giles die."

Miss Simpson gave him a look which said "you too?" as clearly as if she had spoken the words, She opened a drawer of her desk and handed the certificate across to him:

"As you can see, he died of a heart attack – the Countess's personal physician signed the certificate."

"The Countess?"

"The Countess Herritzen. You met her the first day you visited the school. She was on her way to Vienna with her personal physician and happened to drop by to see Mircalla ... such a sweet girl."

Richard opened his mouth, thought better of it, and closed it again. He had wanted to point out that the Countess's visit – and with a doctor in tow – seemed too good a coincidence to

be true. Instead, after a moment's thought, he handed the certificate back and said:

"But Amanda told me that Giles had a deep gash on his neck."

"Amanda had no right to tell you any such thing," snapped Miss Simpson, sitting upright with a sudden jerky movement. "Giles died of a heart attack. His neck got cut when he fell against a tombstone after the attack. He was dead already. The doctor assured me of that."

"I'm sorry, Miss Simpson." Richard left the presence.

All afternoon, he wandered through the corridors of the school and through the grounds, thinking about what had happened, and also looking for Mircalla and Janet. Of neither girl was there any sign.

At last, he made up his mind to do what he should have done in the first place, and made his way up the path towards the cemetery. He certainly expected to see none of the girls there, but as he came out of the woods, he saw a figure straighten up in the cemetery, turn, see him, and run swiftly away through the archway that led to the castle grounds. Richard frowned. He could not be sure, from that distance, but he was almost sure that the figure was that of Mircalla.

Richard walked over to the grave by which the figure had been standing. All around were signs of recent activity, the weeds trampled down, the earth disturbed. This, thought Richard, must have been where the body was found. He looked all round at the tombs nearby, but he could find no sign of blood, or skin, could not locate the spot where Giles had fallen and cut his neck.

He walked slowly back down the path to the school, a sorely troubled man. He could not believe all that had happened around him since his arrival in Styria. So much for a restful holiday. The facts of life that stared him in the face were stranger than any fiction that he had devised.

All the talk of vampires in the village, then the terrible scream when Trudi had been attacked and killed, the awful look of fear and loathing on her face – what wild animal could have killed so neatly, and why had the dog merely whined and trembled in fear. If any animal had come near, the dog might have run away, but he would have run away barking. Then there was Susan's sudden illness. She had seemed all right

to him the day before. And then, the following night, Giles Barton had met his death, whatever the cause of it.

He had told Richard he was just going out for a short stroll before turning in, and he had never come back. The cemetery was not either a short or pleasant stroll in anyone's imagination, especially at that time of night.

Richard shook his head. Somehow all his thoughts merely led back to Mircalla, yet there was nothing to tie her in to any of the mysteries, unless you let fancy take control:

Trudi had died the night that Mircalla had arrived in the valley. Then, the night Susan went sick, he had found Mircalla running through the woods; and now, with this latest tragedy, there was nothing to tie her in at all – she had not even gone to the cemetery with the others – unless you took the fact of her aunt being on hand with her personal doctor when the body was found.

Richard ate no supper but retired to the room he had shared with Giles Barton, soon after dark, determined to look through some of Giles' papers, in an effort to find some clue as to what he might have been doing in the cemetery.

He was just going through the desk, grateful to find the bottle of schnapps that Giles had hidden the night before, when he heard a noise behind him and whirled round. The door was slowly opening and a figure stood in the shadows at the head of the stairs. In the half-light, he saw a glint of golden hair and was unaccountably frightened:

"Who's there?"

There was no reply, and he could hear his heart beating in his ears as the figure moved slowly forward into the light.

CHAPTER FIVE

"By God, but you frightened me." As he spoke, Richard poured out two glasses of the schnapps, and handed the other one to his visitor.

"I'm sorry," said Janet. "But it was a shock. I thought for a moment that it was Giles standing over his desk. And Miss Simpson had only just told me he was dead."

"You didn't know?"

"No. I've been out all day."

"Well, now you're back, have a drink. At least there's two of us haven't yet deserted the sinking ship."

Janet sat down on the bed, then got up quickly. Richard chuckled and cleared a pile of books from a chair onto the desk before inviting her to take a comfortable seat. For himself, he sat on the hard-backed chair which Giles had used to sit at his work.

Janet took a drink, then sighed:

"I'm sorry, sorry to disturb you, that is – but I want to talk to you."

"Well, fire away."

"It's not so simple, now that I'm here. I mean – well, it's ridiculous."

"Take your time. Sip your drink and try to relax. When you're ready to tell me, you will, right?"

"I'm sorry," again Janet gave her light smile, the smile that had warmed Richard before he had met Mircalla. He felt a twinge of regret that the other younger girl should loom so large in his mind, now that he was at last alone with Janet:

"You don't have to apologise. That's what I'm here for. Mr. Richard Lestrange, author, wit and clearer-up of mysteries. Ancient superstitions and disappearances a speciality."

Janet paled and shuddered:

"Don't."

"Now it's my turn to be sorry." He leant forward and assumed a hangdog expression. Janet was forced to laugh at the look on his face, and the laughter relaxed her. Richard waited until she had finished laughing:

"Now, tell me, what's the trouble?"

Janet frowned:

"I don't know, really – that's the awful thing – but I feel sure that something is terribly wrong . . ."

"Wrong? Where exactly? With what?"

"Well, this valley for a start. That awful mouldering ruin of a castle, and now all these things happening."

"Look," said Richard." "I know it's always upsetting when somebody dies – and I expect that you knew Giles Barton quite well, but –"

Janet held up her hand:

"No, it's not that – I mean, well, that was horrible, but it

isn't what I mean – it's a whole number of things, and I'm not sure that I can explain it properly."

"Start at the beginning."

"Well, first there was Susan."

Richard got up and poured another drink for both himself and the girl:

"Susan? What's happened to her, then – apart from the fever that's pulled her down?"

Janet shrugged:

"Well, that's not the truth for a start. Miss Simpson told everyone to say that. It's just a story so that no one would ask any questions about where she was. Didn't she tell you then?"

"No, she didn't," shrugged Richard. "Perhaps she thought the fewer people who knew the better – where is she, anyway?"

"That's just it. She's disappeared."

"What? When did this happen?"

"Well, she hasn't been seen by anyone since the night before last. I wanted to go straight to the local police in the village, but Miss Simpson begged me not to. Anyway, I don't want to harm the school so –"

"Harm the school be blowed. You should have gone to them straight away. Anything could have happened." Richard had risen again, and Janet noticed his sudden pallor. She took another sip of the warming liquid and went on with a shudder:

"I don't know whether it's just my nerves, but it seems to me that Giles' death is more than just a coincidence – I have this kind of horrifying presentiment – that someone else is going to die – I don't know what to think or do."

Richard went over and sat on the arm of the chair, so that he could put a protective arm round her shoulder. She snuggled in close to him, but Mircalla filled his thoughts. When he spoke his voice was kind and gentle, but without the personal note that Janet so hoped for:

"Come on now, Janet. That's just letting your imagination run away with you."

"I suppose so."

"That's right. The best thing for you to do is to finish your drink, toddle off to your room, and get a good night's sleep. It'll do you the world of good."

Janet shook her head:

"If only I could rid myself of this idea that Susan's disappearance and Giles' death are connected in some way – and

with the castle up there."

"Well, Giles had a heart attack. Miss Simpson showed me the death certificate – poor dear, she's got the body laid out in her parlour till the undertaker can come for it tomorrow morning. I don't envy her tonight. Still, that's beside the point. This matter of Susan is much more serious. Does no one know where she might have gone?"

Janet shook her head, then Richard asked suddenly:

"Who shared the room with her? There's four girls to each, isn't there?"

"There's supposed to be," said Janet. "But there were only two in her room; Susan and Mircalla."

"Mircalla?"

So it all led back to her. All the time, everything and everybody pointed at her. Yet that was impossible. Richard covered his consternation by pouring another drink. When he turned back to Janet, his face was composed:

"And what does she say?"

Janet sighed; and shrugged:

"She says she knows nothing about it. Susan apparently tricked her during the night by putting pillows down her bed while Mircalla was asleep."

Richard frowned, but made no comment. It was possible that Mircalla's own nocturnal wanderings could have given Susan the chance to slip away, but the doubt had been planted in his mind, and, try as he could, he could not shake it out. He managed a smile for Janet, to mask the seething worry inside him. The main thing was to calm her down and send her off safely for the night. Only then could he get anything done – take a look at Giles' neck, for one thing. Out loud he said:

"I suppose there could be some quite simple explanation for all this. You don't want to go making a fool of yourself..."

Janet flushed angrily and got up:

"I'm too worried about what could have happened to Susan for that to worry me. I've already told Miss Simpson that I'll wait until tomorrow. But then I am definitely going to the police – will you come with me... Richard?"

He found the use of his Christian name strangely warming. He said hesitantly:

"Yes... I think so... I don't know. Listen, dear, I'm still a bit bewildered – give me some time to think about it – we don't want to be over-hasty."

Janet nodded, satisfied for the moment:

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Well, now," the girl smiled. "I must be getting back. What would happen if the noble Miss Simpson found me at this time of night, alone with a man."

"What would she say indeed," leered Richard. "Mind nobody sees you."

"Poor Miss Simpson. I expect she'd have a heart attack." The laughter died on her lips as she realized what she had said. She bit her lip, and looked as if she was about to cry. Richard squeezed her round the shoulders as he steered her towards the door. As he opened it, she turned to face him:

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For listening."

They smiled at one another, and, a moment later, she was gone, down the darkened stairs.

Richard shut the door, then, after a moment of reflection, he went back and sat at Giles' desk, to start making a search of his papers. The pile of books he had moved to give Janet a chair were on the desk, and underneath them was Giles's sketch pad. Richard shifted the books to the edge of the desk, then flipped over the pages of the pad. Suddenly he stopped and flipped back. Half-way through the book was an otherwise blank page on which were written in block capitals the words:

MARCILLA
CARMILLA
MIRCALLA

The last name was heavily ringed. Richard frowned angrily and threw the pad to one side. He glanced at the muddle that filled the pigeon-holes of the desk, then looked at the pile of books he had moved. He took the top one, and turned it round to look at the spine. Dirt and age had obscured the gold lettering of the title, and he brushed it idly on his sleeve:

"THE KARNSTEINS. A HISTORY OF EVIL, by Baron Von Hartog."

Richard shrugged. That old gasbag. By the time he was at university, Richard had known how to avoid him and his ridiculous stories. The difference between von Hartog and himself,

was that while he never claimed his works of the supernatural to be anything more than fiction, the baron had always claimed his as facts he had unearthed, skeletons in the closets of great families, mainly. Well, he was a bad writer, and he had to spice things up to make them sell.

As he considered this justification for his attitude, he felt a twinge of guilt. The baron had always sold twice as much as him, even though he had been long dead when Richard took up his career. He thrust the guilt aside together with the book, and began to riffle through the papers in the pigeon-holes.

He was surprised to learn that Giles had had secret ambitions as an author – one pigeon-hole was filled with rejection slips from a well-known London publisher. Richard sighed, perhaps if he needed to write to make a living, he would not be published either.

There was little of interest in the pigeon-holes, and Richard, who was getting tired, yawned and stretched out his arms. Perhaps the whole thing was his imagination anyway, there was usually a rational explanation for everything.

He jumped suddenly, fully awake once again, as his hand sent the pile of books crashing to the floor. He bent down to pick them up, but one had fallen open, its spine worn with much use. His jaw dropped.

The book had fallen open at a black and white lithograph of an old painting. The picture was undoubtedly a portrait of Mircalla, and Richard snatched it up to read the legend under it:

COUNTESS CARMILLA KARNSTEIN – Flemish school, 1709.

The book fell again with a crash. Richard felt the room spinning round and took a deep breath to steady himself, before retrieving it.

It wasn't possible. Carmilla had died a hundred and sixty years before, and this girl was not more than twenty-two. It was a nightmare, sent to try him.

Richard poured himself another drink, and sat down to think things through. He remembered what the landlord had told him – about the curse that fell on the valley every forty years – and this year was the year. He remembered the story about the peasant girl who had disappeared – then the death of Trudi, the horrible teeth marks in her neck.

Richard gasped and dropped his glass on the floor, as he remembered for the first time since that night, the cry that had

brought him across the lawn, where Mircalla had rushed out of the woods. It was the same cry that he had heard from the yard when the serving girl died. Perhaps there was some truth in the stories the old men told.

Richard picked up the other books from the floor, and retrieved the first one that he had put on one side. There was a *History of Styria*, but this was the most innocuous book in the pile. The others had titles like:

"The Black Mass." "The Black Arts and Their Practitioners."

But there was one book more thumbed than all the others:

"The Vampire Legend."

Richard began to leaf through its well-thumbed pages, and his eyes widened in horror at the things he read. Here was a true history of the undead, from their very beginnings in the ancient world.

There was one fact that made his blood run cold. In anything that he had ever written about vampires, Richard had always worked on the old assumption that the greatest enemy these devils faced was bright sunlight. But he learnt from Giles' book that this was not necessarily so. It knocked the main prop away from his mental defence of Mircalla. Though he still believed that all the evidence that pointed towards her was the merest supposition, the worm of doubt was now planted firmly in his mind.

Angrily, Richard threw the book down, then sat brooding for a while. When he glanced up at the clock, it was close to midnight, time when it would be safe for him to begin his check of Giles' body.

Richard put on his coat, and put candle and tinder box in his pocket. He snuffed the candles in his room, opened the door and slipped quietly down the stairs, through the stables and across the yard. The back door was unlocked and he slipped inside, closed it behind him, then waited and listened for any sound, anyone else who might be roaming round the building and might catch him.

As he listened in the darkness, there came to him the creaks and noises of a big house at night, but no sound of human – or inhuman – movement. Cautiously, he began to edge down the corridor towards the main hall, taking one careful pace at a time, doing his best to make no sound. He could feel the dampness of sweat on his brow, and acknowledged grimly that he was not cut out for such nocturnal adventures.

After what seemed like an eternity, he reached the hall, then froze as he saw a still figure at the top of the stairs. A moment later, he was grinning to himself at his nervousness. The shadow proved to be the pillar at the stair-top. He crossed the hall, and went slowly down the corridor that led to Miss Simpson's office and drawing-room.

He tried the door to the drawing-room first. It squeaked, but did not open. Richard stood in the darkness, sweating profusely and cursing the prescience that had caused Miss Simpson to lock it. Then he slipped along, and, without much hope of better luck, he turned the handle of the office door.

The door swung open silently, and Richard slipped inside and closed it carefully behind him. He crossed the office, banged against a chair with his shin, and stood for a moment, fighting back the pain with gritted teeth. Then he moved forward and gained the door that led from office to drawing-room.

Again, Miss Simpson's precautions had been all on the surface. The door swung open, and Richard was inside. He stood for a moment, to allow his eyes to get used to the gloom, then moved forward to the table, on which the shrouded figure lay. He was beginning to feel spooked, and thrust away his fear as he groped in his pocket for candle and tinder.

With the candle lit, flickering and casting vast, unholy shadows on walls and bric-a-brac, he lifted the sheet. The first shock was Giles' face, which, in death, showed an expression of profound happiness, of fulfilment.

Richard made a great effort of will and reached out to grasp the jaw and turn the head so that he could see the dead man's neck. He closed his eyes as he turned the head, then looked down at the "Gash". Though more torn and deeper, the marks on the neck were the same as those on Trudi, the dead serving girl at the inn.

Richard gasped, let go of the jaw, and the head rolled back, as if alive. He dropped the candle, which went out at once, leaving him in a frightening darkness.

Richard took a deep breath, tried to steady himself, and control the shaking of his body. With an effort, he replaced the shroud over Giles' remains, groped on the floor for the candle, pocketed it, and left Miss Simpson's quarters the way he had come.

He had no time to think about what he had seen as he made his way slowly back to the yard and stables, trying to make

sure that he was not discovered. But, once back in his quarters, he undressed and slipped into bed, and had time to try to clear his mind, an exercise in the impossible. It was close to dawn when he finally slipped into a disturbed, nightmare sleep.

The next day, Richard rose early, determined to create a better impression upon Miss Simpson than he had the morning before. He was in the main building in time for breakfast, only to discover that it was the principal's turn to stay late in bed – and who could blame her with the shocks she had suffered.

After breakfast, and a break for the girls, Richard took an English literature class. He found himself unable to keep his eyes off Mircalla, and all the other girls noticed this, and whispered behind their hands about it to their neighbours, much to his embarrassment.

He had decided that a lecture would be a little beyond him this morning, and so he had scrawled an essay subject on the blackboard:

"THE LAKE POETS."

Now, he watched the girls at their labours with varying degrees of concentration. He noticed that while most of them were scribbling away, their tongues sticking from the corners of their mouths with the effort, Mircalla was writing slowly, hardly putting pen to paper. She looked up at him at last, returning his stare, her dark eyes seeming to hold a plea for attention.

Richard walked down to her from the rostrum, and looked over her shoulder at the pitifully small amount of writing she had accomplished. He made his voice sound quiet and even:

"Mademoiselle Herritzen. This essay worries me. I would like to go quickly over your work with you after class."

From somewhere behind him, a girl with a loud stage whisper giggled and said:

"I just bet you would."

Richard turned quickly, but was unable to catch the culprit, though he thought he detected a twinkle in Amanda McBride's eye. He glared at her, and returned to the rostrum to await the eternity before the lesson would be at an end.

The time came at last, and with many a sidelong glance, the girls trooped out, leaving Mircalla alone at her desk, and Richard still sitting on the rostrum, facing her. He sat motionless for a while, and, at last, Mircalla put down her pen, her

face without expression, and coughed.

Richard came out of his trance, and climbed down to stand by the girl. He glanced at the exercise book again, and saw that she had added little to what he had already seen her write:

"I find that your work on the eighteenth century is quite excellent, Mademoiselle Herritzen, but, frankly, your knowledge of the writers of this century is quite deplorable. Have you never heard of the Brontë sisters, or Charles Dickens."

This was all said for the benefit of any girl who might be listening at the door. As Mircalla looked at him, her face reflecting her feelings at his reproof, he lowered his voice and said:

"I must see you. I have to talk to you. It is very important that I do."

Mircalla turned her face away from him, as if it was painful to look into his eyes:

"I can't."

"Why not?" snapped Richard.

"Please, do not press me. I cannot. That is all."

Loudly, Richard said:

"There are also a large number of grammatical errors in your essay."

He waited until Mircalla had turned her face back to him, as if accepting that he had agreed her refusal. Then, his voice harsh and unyielding, he went on:

"Listen, I think you ought to know. I've been looking through Giles Barton's papers . . ."

He paused as the girl frowned, then her eyes widened in what Richard took to be a sudden feeling of dread, but she did not speak. With an effort, Richard dragged his eyes away from her face and looked down at the exercise book:

"Giles had been making some researches – quite extensive researches – into the history of the Karnstein family. . . . They were fascinating, really . . ."

He looked into her eyes once more, but now they were hooded, wary, and all expression had vanished from her pale face:

"I thought that you might be interested."

This time it was Mircalla's turn to drag her eyes away from his. She looked down, then said in a muffled voice:

"When?"

"Tonight. After lights out – at the castle."

"No, not the castle."

Richard hardened his heart to the pleading in her voice and repeated firmly :

"Yes. Tonight. At the castle."

He straightened up before she had time to argue further, picked up the exercise book and closed it :

"Thank you, Mademoiselle."

Mircalla inclined her head at the dismissal, her face devoid of expression, got up and went out of the room. For a long time, Richard stared out of the window, at the girls playing on the green lawn, and thought how far this happy sight differed from the viper's nest of evil that he had uncovered in the valley around them. He prayed with every fibre of his being that he would prove to be wrong about Mircalla.

With an effort, Richard brought his mind back to the present, and turned to leave the classroom for lunch. Janet was waiting outside in the corridor, as if undecided on entering the classroom and disturbing him. He hardly noticed her, but as he closed the door and began to walk past her, she caught his arm :

"Richard?"

"Oh, Janet, hello."

Janet was deeply hurt by this vague greeting, but the only sign she gave of it was a slight frown, and a harshness as she whispered :

"Did you think about it?"

For a second Richard fixed her with a vague, uncomprehending stare, then he snapped his mind together :

"Oh, yes."

"Well, what have you decided we should do? Are you all right, this morning?"

Richard did not take kindly to the personal inquiry :

"Perfectly, thank you," he snapped.

"Well, what should we do?"

Richard tried to make light of Janet's fears. He smiled vaguely and said :

"I think that we ought to go on waiting – just for a little while longer."

"But what about Susan?"

"Just till tonight."

"Why tonight?" said Janet earnestly. "What difference will a few more hours make?"

Richard passed his hand over his brow, where he could feel beads of sweat forming :

"I just need a little more time – to think."

"When will you tell me?"

"Tonight – definitely – come to my room."

Janet reddened, and Richard was suddenly struck by the amusing side of what he had said, so much so that his cares fell away for a moment, to be replaced by the boyish smile that Janet had remembered from that first day:

"Come to my room. We can talk there, it's outside the main building. That's all I meant."

Janet didn't know whether to be pleased or rejected by his remark, but she put a brave face on it:

"Till tonight then."

Somebody nearby giggled and Richard turned to see Amanda running down the corridor, obviously on her way to tell her friends that Richard, who was fast getting a reputation among the girls as the school's Don Juan, had made yet another tryst, this time with their glamorous games mistress.

Richard turned back to Janet, then froze as he saw Miss Simpson standing at the far end of the corridor, staring fixedly at the two of them. He said out of the corner of his mouth:

"Don't look now, but Miss Simpson is glaring at us."

Janet winked and said loudly:

"Mr. Lestrange, I would appreciate it if you got all your work done in your own lessons, and left the girls to me in mine."

Miss Simpson melted away, back to her own office.

"It's all right. She's gone."

"Till tonight, then," smiled Janet.

"Yes . . . Tonight."

After lunch, Richard returned to his own room above the stables and continued his horrified search through Giles Barton's notes and reading matter. The more he read, the more he was frightened by the enormity of the evil that threatened the valley and its occupants.

Somehow he got through the afternoon, and it was nearly dark when he returned to the main building for the evening meal. In the corridor, outside the dining-room, he ran into Mircalla, but she returned his glance with a cool, innocent look, as if there had been no conversation between them, no meeting set for later.

Richard returned to his researches until after lights out, and

only then did he prepare himself for his tryst. Ready, he slipped out of the stables, and skirted the edge of the lawn, hoping not to be seen from the house in the bright moonlight.

Once out of sight of the school building, the moonlight aided his progress up the path to the cemetery. It was only while crossing the cemetery itself that he had his first shuddering of real fear.

Inwardly he argued with himself, trying to talk the fear away. A graveyard at night was very much like a graveyard in the daytime. The darkness lent it no special properties, only the fears of man's alert imagination. Even so, he was relieved when he passed through the archway that marked the entrance to the cemetery from the castle grounds.

There was no sign of Mircalla in the grounds, and he felt strangely relieved that he had arrived first, for he had no doubt but that she would come, and it gave him an opportunity to take the initiative with her on her arrival.

He found a dark spot behind a clump of trees close to the gate and settled down to wait for her, shutting his ears to the mysterious sounds of the forest night.

Richard was shivering with the cold by the time he saw her figure as she flitted through the graves and towards the archway. He took a pace forward, though still keeping himself hidden in the shadows. She came forward through the archway, then paused to look around for him, silhouetted like a shadow-painting in the curve of the arch. Richard felt himself tremble as his whole body cried out to him to move to her, but still he waited.

At last, she moved forward, making for the dark wall of the castle. Richard let her go past him, then stepped abruptly out of the shadows and called her name:

"Mircalla."

She whirled round, and for a moment, Richard could see in the moonlight, that there was unspeakable fear on her face. In a moment it was gone, the expression drained from her. She walked towards him, not looking directly at him, but from left to right, as if someone else was watching them. Instinctively, Richard turned his head, but he could see nothing, and, when he turned back she was standing but a pace from him, her eyes lowered:

"You said you had something to tell me."

Her voice was bored, totally devoid of all emotion, as if it did not matter to her one way or the other, the facts he had to tell, the questions he had to ask. And yet, she had come, as he had asked her to ; she must care.

Richard cleared his throat, it was going to be more difficult than he had thought :

"Yes, I have things to tell."

His own voice sounded strangely harsh, as it echoed in his ears, as if a stranger was speaking from within him.

Mircalla looked up abruptly, and the bottomless depths of her coal-black eyes flashed a direct challenge into his own. He found himself held by her gaze. He ran his tongue over dry lips before speaking :

"Mircalla. I love you."

The girl abruptly flicked her eyes away from his and turned away with a gesture of impatience. He moved forward a pace, and grabbed her arm. For a moment they were both still, then :

"Please. You are hurting me."

He looked down at his hand, saw how tightly it gripped her pale flesh and relaxed the grip, but did not let her go :

"No, please – you have to listen to me – for God's sake."

She inclined her head to stare into his eyes again, her own hot and angry, challenging him. Richard let go of her arm, and his next words were drawn out in a whisper :

"What I have just said to you is not irrelevant. To me, it is the most important thing in life – more important than life itself."

Mircalla's voice was hard, the voice of ageless womanhood :

"Tell me the truth."

Richard felt weak, the girl's eyes seemed to be holding him, hypnotising him. He tried to draw his own away, but found it a task beyond him :

"What truth?"

"Those notebooks. Giles' notes. What was in them that you must demand this meeting of me?"

"Your name," sighed Richard His legs felt weak, but somehow continued to hold him up. He had in a few short words, lost all the advantage he held over her, it melted away from him at the sight and sound of her. His heart ached for her, but there were questions to be answered, and he was still afraid.

"Just my name," asked Mircalla, a new urgency in her voice. "Is that all you have to tell me?"

"Mircalla," breathed Richard softly. "And Marcilla ... and Carmilla."

"Carmilla." Mircalla breathed the name back with an equal intensity. She looked suddenly shaken and vulnerable and lowered her eyes. Amazingly, Richard felt the strength begin to flow through his body again, and his courage was fortified by it. He grabbed her roughly by both arms this time, trying to make her look up at him again, face him for the real challenge of his probings. His own voice was hard and firm this time:

"Yes. I said Carmilla. Carmilla Karnstein."

The girl pulled her head this way and that, avoiding meeting his eyes as she whispered:

"No. It cannot be. No."

"But that is not all, Mircalla. That is but a small piece of what I have found."

"Please, let me go, you have said enough."

Richard almost relented, steeling himself only just in time. He would have to know, her fear showed that it was more important than ever now:

"I found the portrait."

The girl froze:

"Portrait?"

"The portrait of Carmilla – the portrait of you."

"It is not true, Richard. Tell me it is not true."

"Oh, yes it is. That is why I must know more. The portrait was of a girl who has been dead for over a hundred years, and yet it was of you. There can be no mistake. I have studied you every moment that I could since first meeting you, and I have made no error."

The girl had ceased to struggle entirely now. She hung limply in his arms, and his heart went out to her, but the time for pity was past:

"I found more besides that. Giles had collected books of magic, of the black arts, and histories of the Karnstein family – histories of evil, and more ..."

"More?"

"Yes, Mircalla."

"What more?" She was shaking like a leaf, the question forced from her, though she did not want to ask it. Richard could feel her fear, like a physical presence, a third person with

them in the moonlight. He felt as though he would burst with his doubts and love for her in mortal combat:

"Mircalla. Just explain it all to me," he pleaded. "That is all I ask."

Once again, the certainty drained out of him, and seemed to fill her with a new resolve as if it were an actual substance flowing between them. She raised her eyes and returned his gaze, locking his eyes once more on her, draining the energy from him afresh:

"It is simple," she said firmly. "I am, as you have guessed, a Karnstein. Our family changed its name, that is all."

"But why, Mircalla?"

The girl shook her head:

"If you have truly read those books, as you have said, then you must know why."

Richard relaxed. It seemed to explain almost everything – then he tensed again, for what it did not explain and quiet was his worst fear of all. The girl went on:

"Does that explain why I look like Carmilla – it is why my name is Mircalla. Giles explained it the day he brought myself and the others to study in the cemetery. In great families, it is often the habit to give each generation of daughters an anagram of their mother's name, through generation after generation."

She lapsed into silence, but Richard did not move, his expression did not change as he steeled himself to ask the question that would have to be asked.

Mircalla's lips curled into a sneer, as if she had read in his eyes, his thoughts:

"What more is it that you want to know – if I am of the undead – a vampire?"

At the sound of the word, Richard averted his face as if she had cut him with a whip. He let go of her hands and his own dropped to his sides. He looked beaten, but Mircalla was on the attack now and was going to show no mercy:

"Is that what you believe of me? Is Mr. Richard Lestrange, the well-educated son of a British peer, and a famous writer, really a peasant at heart? Do you believe in the mysteries your own mind weaves and creates?"

With a superhuman effort, Richard stepped away from her. Her words made him angry now, angry because he was ashamed that she spoke only the truth:

"Yes, I believe. I believe that such things exist that are unknown to us, as unknown as the Face of God and the face of Satan."

"But those are the beliefs of simpletons."

"Not so. I believe that in this world there is a power of evil, as well as a power of good."

"But how would you know of such things, living in your little world of fantasy, on your smug little island of merchants."

"I have read and studied all over Europe," said Richard. "But more than that – I spent the whole of last night going through Giles' papers, the papers of a man who has made a special study of the powers of dark – and they are powerful evidence of such powers. What I have seen in his books has frightened me for the soul of all mankind."

"Evidence," snarled Mircalla. "Evidence of what?"

Slowly, as if his head was a great weight, Richard raised up his eyes and looked directly at her, accusing. His voice was hoarse with emotion:

"That you are a vampire."

She took a pace away, as if trying to take her eyes from his, and her hand went to her mouth in shock:

"But, I have explained."

"Explained? You have explained nothing. You have admitted you are a Karnstein – but which Karnstein – are you among the living or the dead?"

"I cannot say more," shrilled the girl. "You must trust me, Richard."

He felt the whine of pleading in her tone, and knew he was close to the truth. His eyes travelled over her face, searching out the answer from it:

"But are you a vampire?"

"You say that," whimpered the girl. "And you tell me that you love me?"

"That is why I must know," breathed Richard, advancing on her. "You must prove to me that you are not – you must love me, too."

He grabbed suddenly for her waist and swept her into his arms, so that she gasped with surprise. At first she tried to squirm away, as his lips brushed her face, his mouth hungrily sought hers. Then she relaxed as their lips touched. He held away for a moment, then squeezed her fiercely, as his tongue forced her lips open. Her teeth were clenched against his entry,

but as he pressed harder against her, they opened and she submitted herself to him in the passion of their kiss.

With one hand still on her waist, the other travelled up the front of her thin robe, and slipped inside to touch her firm, high breast. Richard could feel the blood pounding through his veins, a strange ecstasy overtaking him.

Mircalla sank slowly to the ground, Richard following her, still embracing her. He opened her robe slowly and saw that she was naked beneath it. Her hands took his and led him to the tiny triangle of light hair that covered her. Then her hands searched feverishly for him, found him, and held him.

Mircalla laughed with delight as she felt him go strong in her hands, then, with an abrupt movement, she rolled away from him, her eyes wild as she tried to control the passion that he had unleashed in her:

"No, we cannot."

"I must," panted Richard.

"Why?" sobbed Mircalla. "If I were a vampire – then you would die."

"I must have my proof," said Richard. He was still now, his face hard as he controlled the passion that seethed within him.

Mircalla was very still and quiet for a moment, as if made from stone. Richard kept his eyes on the curve of her breast as he hoped against hope that she would give the answer that he so much desired. At last, she said, her voice in the quietest of whispers, hardly reaching him:

"Yes . . . we will."

She lay back, waiting for him, opening herself for him, one knee slightly raised. Richard moved towards her, infinitely slow, and his lips tenderly brushed hers.

With a sudden movement of impatience, she pulled her face away, then caught and held him, guiding him quickly into her. They kissed again as he grew within her. Her breath came in short gasps, her eyes closed in the passion of the moment.

She began to make strong rhythmic circles with her hips slow at first, then faster and faster. Her lips brushed his cheek, and she tried to blot out the thought of what she must do – how she must kill to preserve herself.

As the movements became faster, Richard stopped watching her and gave himself up to the exquisite pleasure of the moment. Unable to help herself, Mircalla's mouth travelled down

his cheek towards his vulnerable soft neck. Her lips brushed the spot where she must bite, and draw out his life's blood.

Her lips parted, and curled back off her young fangs, as she poised her head to strike. Then, as the movements became faster and faster, she could control herself no longer. She climaxed and the orgasm overcame her like a wave of ultimate pleasure. Her teeth snapped shut as she drew her head back to gasp her pleasure. A second later and Richard followed her to Paradise.

They clung together on the ground, still coupled, and Mircalla began to weep softly as she kissed her lover's lips and cheeks. She could not kill him, could not take his blood, for she, an undead, had been touched by the impossible – touched by the intensity of his love for her.

Richard, who did not understand the reason for her weeping, did not question it, but held her to him, to comfort her. Neither of them moved for a long time, they were unaware of it passing. But at last, Richard knew that for now the moment was over, he had savoured her to the full – until the next time.

He moved gently away from her, rose and straightened his clothes. She lay where he had left her, her eyes shut, exposed to him in the radiance of her beauty.

"We'd better go back," he sighed at last.

She opened her eyes, and raised her hands to him as he reached down to help her up. She slipped her robe back on, never for a moment taking her eyes off him, but eyes that were now filled with love, and did not hypnotize.

When she was ready, she went up to him :

"Good night, Richard, my love."

He bent forward and kissed her lightly, then :

"Wait, Mircalla. We will go back together."

The girl shook her head :

"No. There are things that I must do. It is better, in case you are seen from the house, that I am not with you."

He opened his mouth to protest, but she laid the finger that indicated silence on his lips, before turning and disappearing into the darkness of the cemetery. He tried to follow her in the dimming moonlight, but she was soon lost to view.

It was only as he started down the path from the cemetery to the school lawns that he realized that she had never really answered the question that he had put so urgently. He shrugged and began to whistle. It didn't really matter now.

Richard stopped whistling as he reached the open space of lawn that led to the main building. He went off the path just before he reached the open space, and began to make his way slowly towards the stable yard.

As he reached the yard, he froze in surprise, to see the light pouring out from the window in his room. As he watched, he saw a flash of blonde hair pass the window. Perhaps Mircalla had changed her mind and had gone to wait for him in his room.

Almost shouting his joy out loud, he made for the stables and took the stairs noisily, two at a time.

He burst open the door and ran in, shouting:

"My darling, so you have come."

Then he stopped abruptly and choked back Mircalla's name, relieved he had not already called it, as Janet Playfair looked up at him from the chair, a sudden smile on her lips at his greeting.

CHAPTER SIX

It took Richard some moments to break the tableau, as he stood in the doorway, biting back the words he would have spoken had his visitor been Mircalla.

Janet saw the look of shocked surprise on his face, and her own smile faded in her disappointment. She waited for him to move, and at last, he came forward into the room, shrugging his shoulders in a wordless embarrassment.

"Who were you expecting?" snapped Janet.

"No one," shrugged Richard. "That is, I got stuck, wasn't able to get back before. I see you've made yourself at home."

In his pre-occupation, his words were unnecessarily abrupt, but Janet was taken aback by them:

"Well, the door was open."

Richard forced a smile and went back to close it. His voice became gentler:

"That's all right."

He walked over to the desk, picked up the two glasses and the schnapps bottle and poured out two glasses. He handed one to Janet who took it, sipped, then said:

"Thank you. I didn't like to help myself."

Richard nodded:

"Well, what's the trouble."

Janet frowned and looked at him closely. Richard looked as if he had been in a fight, and was tired, drained of energy. She frowned and said:

"What's your decision?"

"What?" It was Richard's turn to be puzzled. His mind was still too full of the wonderful moments he had spent with Mircalla, for more mundane problems to intrude.

Janet put down her glass with an impatient gesture, then folded her arms and sighed:

"Come on, Richard. I've been worried half out of my mind all afternoon and evening. You promised you'd give me an answer tonight. That's way I've been waiting . . ."

She paused to give him a chance to make a fuller apology, but when it was obvious that none was to be forthcoming, she snapped:

"For hours."

Richard nodded, frowning as he put his thoughts in order. He walked back to Giles' desk and glared down at the papers on it. When he turned, his face had cleared, and he said:

"Yes, Janet, I'm sorry."

"Well, you promised an answer." Janet thawed a little at his smile, but not much.

"Well, I've thought about it – and I think that you should say nothing."

Janet's jaw dropped with amazement at the calmness of his tone. She took a few minutes to collect herself enough to say:

"Nothing? Nothing?"

"That's right," grinned Richard. "I've thought about it, and I think that the whole thing's a product of your imagination."

"Come on, Richard, what's the matter?"

"Nothing." Richard stiffened, suddenly looked guilty. "I just think you've got the whole thing out of proportion."

"About Susan disappearing?" Janet's voice became louder, she was getting angry. Richard was amused to note that the small part of his mind not taken up with Mircalla, was telling him that he approved of the sight:

"No, I think you're just getting out of proportion with all these sinister constructions that you're putting on it. Miss Simpson has a lot of experience with young people – I'm sure her decision is the right one."

Janet's answer was a snort:

"She's only thinking of her precious finishing school."

"For which you work," snapped Richard. "Just remember that. She is your employer."

Janet tried another tack. She was fast becoming convinced that no man was really as pig-headed as Richard appeared to be:

"I don't see what difference it can make anyway, even if Miss Simpson is right. Listen, if Susan did run off with some man or other – and I really don't believe she has done – don't you think that the police should have been informed – or her parents, at least. Miss Simpson owes them that much – all the money they're paying for her to look after the girl."

Richard did not answer, and he turned his head to stare out of the window into the darkness, so that his eyes would not catch her steady, angry gaze. Janet frowned, her eyes narrowing:

"Richard, what's the matter with you?"

"Matter? Nothing, why?"

"Oh, it's just that you seem somehow different. It's just this last day or two – you've changed."

Richard turned back to the desk; again his eyes avoided Janet's. He said with a mock-heartiness:

"There you go again, you see. Picking up any little thing and blowing it up out of all proportion. There's nothing changed, I'm just the same."

Janet banged her glass down:

"That's what you think."

Richard turned, reddening with guilt. To Janet it looked like anger, and his words did nothing to belie the impression:

"What do you mean?"

"I don't have to tell you that." Janet bit her lip. This whole conversation was getting ridiculous. It was obvious that the man cared nothing for her, that his charm, as when they had first met, was just a pose, designed to take in any gullible female who happened to be placed in front of him – well, she'd been gullible all right. She could feel a tear at the corner of her eye, and she wiped it away with a surreptitious movement, hoping that he would not notice. She had her pride.

She walked to the door; if she didn't get out fast, she felt that she would break down in tears:

"To think that I thought of you as someone honest, and –

and courageous. That's how you seemed when you came here."

She opened the door, the tears were welling up. As she ran out, he heard her voice choke away:

"Don't you see, I . . ."

Richard turned round from the desk, and stared at the inky blackness beyond the open door. He heard her footsteps on the stone flags of the stables below, then the slamming of the outer door, and the sound of running across the yard.

Richard slumped down on the hard chair by the desk: Women, he would never fathom them. They changed by the hour rather than by the day.

He finished his drink, then poured another from the bottle at his side. He had liked Janet from the first moment he had seen her taking her gymnastics class, as he had come across the lawn with Giles. The moment he thought of Giles, the image of Janet's healthy face was replaced by that of the dead man – looking so happy in death – and the terrible marks in his neck.

Richard frowned. His meeting in the cemetery with Mircalla had been a wonderful, unforgettable experience, a binding of their love, for he understood now that she loved him with an intensity that equalled his love for her; but it had not given him any of the answers he sought.

Giles had known about Mircalla, had known that she was really a Karnstein, and yet seemed to have done nothing about it. The image of Giles was replaced by that of Trudi, lying dead in the yard, the whining dog crouched near her side, the terrible marks on her throat; the awful death scream she had given. He had heard that same scream again – on the night that Susan had disappeared.

He sat upright as two facts swam together in his fuddled brain. He had run into Mircalla running from the direction of the scream that night – but he had been looking for Giles. Giles had gone out, and had disappeared, Richard remembered. He had been asleep by the time the other man had returned – and Susan had disappeared.

Richard got up and went to the desk. Giles had known something else, of that he was now convinced. Why, otherwise, would he have made all the notes about Mircalla – why had he gone up to the cemetery at the dead of night, only to be killed, killed with that happy expression on his face.

Once more he opened the book and stared down at the old

portrait of Carmilla Karnstein. Was it possible that two girls, a hundred and sixty years apart in time, could look so much like twins?

Whatever it was that Giles had known, it was enough to send him out to his death. And no matter which way it turned, the trail always seemed to lead back to Mircalla.

With an angry curse, Richard snapped the book shut, and sat down again. His mouth was set in a grim line. Whatever Mircalla's secret proved to be, he knew that she would have to be protected, knew that he would give his life for her, if she required it of him.

Richard got up, shrugged off his jacket and lay down on his bed. He knew that he would get no sleep that night, but rest he must have, while he thought.

It was nearly dawn, when he finally fell into a restless doze. All night long, the facts had gone round and round in his head, and all through his dreams, he saw the recurring images of Giles' neck, then Trudi's, then Mircalla, smiling at him wth tenderness and understanding.

As the first flickerings of dawn light touched the sky, Janet Playfair got off the top of her bed. She too had not slept that night, for she had determined her course of action. Whatever were her private feelings and hopeless love for Richard, she must do what had to be done, in spite of his advice.

Instinctively, she knew that it was the coming of Mircalla Herritzen that had taken away Richard's interest from her, and she felt a deep loathing for the girl. Susan had shared a room with her and now Susan was missing; Giles Barton had been obviously interested in her, and now Giles was dead.

Janet slipped on her gym shoes so that she could get downstairs and away from the school without being seen. She went hurriedly down the stairs, and out the side door. Instinctively, she looked up at Richard's window, and saw that the candle was still flickering, but there was no sign of him. Perhaps he had gone to sleep and left it burning. Janet skirted the stables and walked past the well, as she made for the end of the school drive and the road to the village.

Twice she turned suddenly, with a distinct feeling that she was being followed – not from the school, she knew enough about tracking to know that she had disturbed no one there, but someone had been watching from the woods near the well,

on the path down to the lake's edge and the old boathouse, perhaps.

Well, at least she knew Susan was not at the boathouse. That was one of the first places she had looked on her walk round the lake.

Janet came out of the trees, at the edge of the road that led to the village. She looked from left to right, to be sure that no one was waiting there for her. Then she walked to the centre of the road and began to walk slowly in the direction of the village.

She was still aware that she was being tracked from the trees on the edge of the road. She speeded her walk, then had the satisfaction of hearing a twig snap – a piece of carelessness on the part of her pursuer. She whirled round and dashed in the direction of the sound.

A figure stood in the grees, close to the edge of the road. As she came towards him, he turned and crashed away through the undergrowth. She was unable to see the features, as the man was all but enveloped in a large black cloak – but she knew that she had seen that black cloak somewhere before – and recently. She frowned as she resumed her walk, trying to place the cloak in her memory.

Richard jumped out of bed, awakened by a nervous tattoo of banging on his door. The morning sun was streaming in at his window, and he glanced at the clock as he made for the door. It was only eight, so he knew that he was not late for his morning class.

Even so, it was Miss Simpson who stood on the threshold. She glanced past him, and caught sight of the two glasses and bottle, and her nose wrinkled with distaste. She submitted him to a close scrutiny, but, though he looked tired, she was a little taken aback to see that he did not seem to be suffering from a hangover. She sniffed, obviously disappointed that there was little about Richard's bearing on which she could vent her disapproval.

Richard, made impatient by her long silence, said:

"Can I help you Miss Simpson?"

His tone must have been harsher than he had meant it for the woman was so startled that she stepped back to pace:

"No, that is have you seen Miss Playfair. The girls have reported to me that she is not in the school."

Richard started, then blushed with surprise at his reaction and immediate fright at the thought she might have disappeared. He smiled and said innocently:

"Perhaps she's gone after Susan?"

"After Susan?" Miss Simpson put her guard up quickly and Richard could not but admire her for it,

"Yes."

Miss Simpson recovered fast – with the incisiveness of the scholastic organising mind:

"But Susan has a fever."

Richard sighed:

"Miss Simpson, we both know that isn't true. Susan has disappeared."

"How do you know that?"

"Janet – Miss Playfair told me."

Miss Simpson came into the room and shut the door behind her, as if she feared that the stables were full of eavesdroppers:

"Well, she had no right to tell you, Mr. Lestrange – no right at all."

Richard was getting tired of this attitude:

"Well, she did, Miss Simpson, and there's an end of it – or rather the start of it – she's probably gone to get the police and tell them of Susan's disappearance."

Miss Simpson swayed, and would have fallen, if Richard had not caught her and eased her into a chair. When he spoke, his voice was gentle and filled with sympathy:

"It had to be done, Miss Simpson. It seems that everyone but you knows that something mysterious is happening, something very frightening."

"But the school. I won't have anything said about the school."

Richard sighed:

"Damn the school. I'm sorry, Miss Simpson, but this is something that affects the whole valley. A girl from the village disappeared a month ago, and now there's Susan. A girl in the village was horribly killed, with marks on her neck, only a few days ago, and now there's Giles killed in the same way."

Miss Simpson, red in the face, spluttered:

"Giles died of a heart attack, the doctor said so."

"What doctor?"

Miss Simpson rose, very much on her dignity:

"I hardly see that's any of your business, Mr. Lestrange."

"What doctor?" repeated Richard, as patiently as he could.

"If you must know, it was the Countess Herritzen's personal physician."

Richard turned away. Once again, the trail was leading back to Mircalla and the Karnsteins. Miss Simpson was more enraged by this gesture of apparent rudeness than she had been by his questions:

"What do you have to say to that, young man?"

Richard turned wearily to face her:

"Nothing."

"So I should think." Miss Simpson swept to the door, opened it, then turned: "I would remind you that I am the principal of this school, and I decide what is best for the welfare of the girls."

"Then I only hope," snarled Richard, "that you can produce Susan when the police arrive."

"Why?"

"Because I think that she is dead – and I think that when they find her body, they will see that she died of the same kind of heart attack that really killed Giles Barton. We'll all have a lot of questions to answer then – including the Countess Herritzen's personal physician."

Miss Simpson's only answer to this was an angry snort, then the slamming of the door as she left.

Richard sat down heavily, and hoped that his guess had been right. If Janet had gone for the police it would produce an awkward situation, but one that might be faced and dealt with. No policeman was interested in the superstitions of country folk – not in these modern times. They wanted facts and more facts, and only when they had enough facts to put together, could they solve a mystery – and this was undoubtedly not a mystery of facts. At all costs, Mircalla must not become involved.

But Richard had not reckoned with the intelligence of Inspector Heinrich.

Inspector Heinrich hummed softly to himself as he glanced first at the trees as they slid past, with slow dignity, then at the worried English girl who sat next to him in his carriage.

It was pure chance that he had been staying in the village, and the local policeman had aroused him at the inn – but the inspector was a great believer in chance, and was excited that his inquiries should move forward in this way.

He had arrived in the village the day before. His area of res-

ponsibility was a large one, but he liked to make a tour of the different valleys whenever this was possible, and the case of the disappearing peasant girl had made it possible.

Over the spring and early summer, a number of cases had been reported to his office in Vienna of girls, young peasant girls, who had disappeared, leaving no trace. In all cases the locals had pronounced them respectable girls from good homes, and in many of the statements, the parents were prepared to swear that their children were still virgins, who had formed no particular liaisons, other than with boys their own age whom they had known since childhood.

The inspector might have expected this statement, and sworn on the Bible, in one or perhaps two cases, parents were so blind, and it never failed to amaze him how often they were mistaken about their children – but ten cases out of twelve, and all in Styria. Once again the coincidence was too much to be borne, and the inspector had built solutions from less than he had to go on now.

He had little luck with his inquiries in the other villages he had visited, but now, with Karnstein the second to last, he seemed to have struck a rich seam of clues.

The Inspector was from Styrian country stock himself, and he respected the word of the peasants. As a country boy, he had been brought up on local superstition and legend, and tales of vampires and the like were not to be dismissed as easily by him, as some town detectives might have done.

He was already aware of the local legend of the Karnsteins and therefore had little time for the gossip of the local landlord, until the man had mentioned the death of his servant, Trudi.

The inspector had gone at once to the local policeman and demanded as to why the death had not appeared in his weekly report to Vienna, only to receive the reply that the girl had obviously been killed by some wild animal.

Heinrich had ordered an exhumation at once, and had seen the tell-tale marks of the vampires. So he already knew what he was after. He had planned to visit the Karnstein Castle the next day, but was happy to be wakened in the morning by the policeman, now very much on his toes with a superior in his area, who had brought with him this lovely young English girl from the school, who had a tale to tell of a disappearance and a death – a natural death, it would appear, but one whose circumstances would need investigating just the same.

Over breakfast, Heinrich, who could be very gentle when he thought it would get results, had coaxed the whole story out of a frightened Janet. He could guess that the missing American girl was already dead, but nothing in his face and manner imparted this conclusion to the near-hysterical girl he was questioning.

As the carriage turned from the road up the drive that led to the front of the school, Heinrich took another glance at the nervous girl. She was going to make some man very happy, one day, he thought. Oh, to be twenty years younger and with all my hair.

Which brought him to Miss Simpson. From the way Janet Playfair had described her nervous, intense, inclined to frailty, a ruthless bullying approach would seem to be the one to get the quickest results. Kindness could only be used where it could be used to best effect. Heinrich was a policeman first, and a human being a poor second.

The carriage made a wide sweep at the top of the drive to come to a halt at the front door. Janet started to rise nervously:

"You won't need me, Inspector."

He took her arm, a comforting, paternal smile on his face:

"That is where you are wrong, Miss Playfair. I need you very much."

"But –"

The inspector interrupted quickly, firmly, but still kind, he answered her unspoken excuse:

"Do not worry, you need not fear Miss Simpson, I will see to that. She has enough to fear from me, without turning any wrath onto you."

He stepped down from the carriage, then helped his passenger to alight. He turned and gave an order to his driver:

"Go back to the village. You may return for me this afternoon around four. If the constable wants me, he may send you with a message."

The driver saluted, and set the carriage in motion. Heinrich and Janet watched the vehicle finish its circular sweep, then the inspector rang the front-door bell.

"That's all right," smiled Janet. "I'll let you in."

The inspector winked at her:

"You are under my protection and this is an official visit. We must do everything to uphold the dignity of the law."

Janet returned his smile. Since her doubtful trip to the village in the early morning, this kindly man had done much to calm her fears, and she knew instinctively that he would not let her down now.

It was Miss Carstairs, the Matron, who answered the door, bustling out on the step to ask the stranger his business:

"How can I help you, I am the matron – oh, Miss Playfair, it's you."

She stood aside to let them in. In the hall, the inspector glanced round swiftly, his eyes trained to take in every detail at one glance:

"I am Inspector Heinrich of the Vienna Police. I would like to see Miss Simpson at once, if you please."

As he spoke, he dipped into his waistcoat pocket and glanced at his heavy watch, as if to add emphasis to the urgency of the request.

Miss Carstairs flushed:

"Certainly, this way, Sir."

She bustled down the corridor towards Miss Simpson's office, then turned in her walk and addressed Janet:

"Will Miss Simpson be pleased to see you, Miss Janet, she's been worried half to death, not knowing where you went this morning."

She reached the door and opened it without knocking, dived inside, and closed it behind her. After a brief moment, the door opened again, and she stood aside to let them pass.

The inspector waited until Miss Carstairs was gone, then checked the door was closed behind him. It was only then that he stepped forward and allowed Miss Simpson a glance. He saw before him an English woman, of middle years, obviously a spinster, a type of woman that the British were so good at turning out; competent, efficient, with a dedication to their chosen work that left most women in other countries standing. Now she looked on the verge of breakdown, as if everything was just getting on top of her.

"Good morning. My name is Inspector Heinrich, and I am from the Vienna Police."

Miss Simpson kneaded her hands in agitation, but her voice was controlled and level:

"And how can I help you, Inspector?"

Damn, thought Janet, she's going to be difficult and try to bluff it out. Aloud, she said:

"I sent for him, Miss Simpson. I reported it."

"What, child?"

"About Susan – and Giles. He knows everything."

"Everything?" Miss Simpson gave a very good impression of injured innocence, and the inspector said:

"Miss Playfair came to see me this morning. She told me that one of your pupils, a Miss Susan Pelly, had disappeared, and that one of your masters, a Mr. Giles Barton, had died under mysterious circumstances."

"Janet, you had no right." Miss Simpson turned back to the inspector. "Miss Pelly has not disappeared. She had to go away for a few days. As for Mr. Barton, his death was confirmed by a very eminent doctor as a heart attack."

"Come now, Miss Simpson," snarled the inspector, leaning across the desk so that his face almost touched hers. "There is no use lying, Miss Pelly has disappeared, has she not."

Miss Simpson looked down at the desk. Heinrich could see that she was close to tears, and hoped he would not have to be too hard on her. He was relieved when she said:

"Yes, all right, she's vanished. I don't know what to do."

"Then why this?"

"Why what?"

"Why this cover up? You are responsible for these girls here. One of them disappears and you cover it up, make no attempt to find her, rescue her, why? why? why?"

Miss Simpson sighed, then put her head in her hands to try and steady herself. At last she looked up:

"I realize now, Inspector, that I have been a very foolish woman, but it seemed like the best idea at the time . . . for the school, I mean."

The inspector raised his hands in a gesture of despair and confusion that would, under other circumstances, have been comic and have done much to explain why he had always remained a confirmed bachelor:

"Come now, the truth, Miss Simpson."

"But I've told you, Inspector . . ."

"No, Miss Simpson, you haven't started to tell me. I said the truth. You realized all the time that it was the wrong thing for you to do. You are an intelligent woman, I can see that, I can also presume it from your profession. A young girl was in your charge, now she has been missing – for three days."

Miss Simpson clasped her hands together as if praying that

divine intervention would sweep her tormentor away:

"You don't understand. I have other responsibilities – I had to think of the effect that it would have on the other girls – they are all delicate young creatures –"

"Nonsense. It is my experience as a policeman that there are few people less delicate than young women – or more callous of the suffering of others."

"In your work," snapped Miss Simpson, "it is unlikely that you have much to do with the type of young lady for whom this establishment was founded."

Touché, thought the inspector, the old biddy has backbone after all, one of the old brigade, as the English so nauseatingly put it. Aloud, he said flatly:

"This was a police matter from the very beginning. The girl might be dead – she could be lying in a ditch somewhere – her throat cut from ear to ear."

He made an expressive gesture with his hand, and Miss Simpson leant back in her chair, putting an arm up to shield her eyes from the vision his words produced:

"Oh, God," she moaned. "Please not that."

The inspector leant on the desk again, then glanced at Janet, who was standing in the corner of the room, staring at him, a shocked expression on her face. This was a side of the inspector that she had not seen that morning.

The inspector pushed himself away from the desk and began to pace restlessly up and down the room, waiting for Miss Simpson to recover her composure enough to lower her arm, which was still theatrically raised. As soon as she was sure that she was going to get no sympathy for her distress of mind, Miss Simpson complied and the inspector said:

"Now, I would point out that, if Miss Playfair had not come to me this morning, we would still be in ignorance of this terrible thing."

"But you must understand ... the other girls," whined Miss Simpson.

"So you keep protesting, Miss Simpson, but I too would like to point out that I am thinking of the other girls – I am thinking of their safety – did you think that what could happen to one, could not happen to others?"

"No, I didn't think ..."

"No, you didn't think."

The inspector waited patiently for a sign that Miss Simpson was now thoroughly cowed. He got it almost at once :

"I'm sorry, Inspector."

From her position as a privileged, yet embarrassed observer, Janet felt a wave of pity for the bullied woman, and bit her lip in shame at what she had started.

The inspector sat down in the comfortable chair that faced Miss Simpson's own – a symbol that there was now confidence between them, and went on :

"Very well, what is past is past. This is a police matter now, and a very serious one, more serious than just her disappearance."

"How?" It was Janet who came forward and spoke.

The inspector beamed at her :

"Why not sit down. This may take a little time, eh?"

Janet pulled up a chair, and the inspector waited until she was comfortably seated, thus straining Miss Simpson's nerves almost to breaking point :

"You ask me how is it important. I will tell you. This girl, she is a visitor here, a visitor to the empire, a guest of my country. There may turn out to be political consequences that we cannot envisage."

Janet leant forward and spoke in a quiet voice, but firmly :

"Inspector Heinrich, I am sure that Miss Simpson's apology should be accepted. She acted, as always, only in the best interests of the school."

The inspector nodded :

"That is so. She has been foolish, but from the best of motives, I understand that – the parents of the girl, they have been informed, I assume?"

Janet glanced sharply at Miss Simpson, who shook her head with an infinite weariness :

"No, I am afraid –"

The inspector bounded out of his chair. In his excitement, he lapsed into German :

"Mein Gott, Das – I am sorry, forgive me. You must write a letter to them immediately."

Miss Simpson nodded like a mandarin, but, mesmerised with fright by his stare and the look of rage on his face, she made no other attempt to move. After a moment, the inspector walked slowly round the desk, and thrust his face forward till it was inches from the petrified woman :

"I said now, Miss Simpson." He enunciated each word separately with a slow deliberation, as if speaking to a backward child.

Without taking her eyes off him, Miss Simpson's hands unclasped and she began to fumble for notepaper from the rack on the side of her desk. Janet rose and pulled out the sheet she needed, placing it carefully in front of her. She felt intensely sorry for the older woman, though she realized, in fairness to the inspector, that she was being frightened no more than she deserved.

The inspector stepped away from her side, and Miss Simpson relaxed visibly. She groped for her pen, dipped it in the ink, and began to write very slowly, still dazed by the treatment she had received. The inspector walked over to the window and looked out at the girls, who were strolling in small groups on the lawn. Janet came and stood next to her:

"Is that all, Inspector? Miss Simpson is very upset. I don't think she can take much more."

The inspector held up his hand, smiled and spoke very softly:

"I have dealt with all manner of people for many years – that is how I became an inspector. Have patience, Miss Playfair. You I judged to treat with kindness and you told me everything you could. Miss Simpson would have bluffed me out for the moment, and would have wasted even more precious time than has been lost already.

Janet gritted her teeth:

"You think that Susan's dead, don't you?"

The inspector put a finger to his lips:

"I have not said so, I do not know – but I think so, yes, I am afraid."

"It will break her heart. This has all been too much for her."

"We shall see."

The pen ceased to scratch, and Miss Simpson said in a quavering voice:

"Inspector. It is finished."

The inspector turned and gave her a dazzling smile. He leant by her side again, and glanced through the letter, making a mental note that Mr. Pelly was currently staying at one of Vienna's most elegant hotels, obviously a man of some substance. He picked the letter up delicately, and handed it to Janet:

"Miss Playfair, when we are finished in here, I would like you to post this."

Despite a glare from Miss Simpson, Janet nodded unhappily, angry that the inspector should use her as his accomplice in front of her humiliated employer.

The inspector said, sharply, but still with courtesy:

"Miss Playfair, would you like to sit down. I have not quite finished."

Dumbly, Janet obeyed his request, and the inspector resumed his position facing Miss Simpson from the far side of her desk. He produced a piece of paper from an inside pocket, glanced at it, smiled to himself and put it away. He glanced at Janet as he spoke:

"And now I'm afraid, we must come to the death of Mr. – Barton, I believe his name was."

"Yes," mumbled Janet. "Giles Barton."

Miss Simpson looked like a trapped mouse:

"But he died of natural causes."

The inspector shook his head:

"That is as may be, Miss Simpson. But that too should have been reported to the authorities. My clerk inquired and he found no record of the death in the village."

"But –" this was as far as Miss Simpson got before the inspector whipped a notebook and pen from his pocket with a theatrical flourish, and held up his hand to cut off the excuse he assumed was coming:

"I know what you are going to say. I do not know the customs of your country, but in Austria a death certificate is required, it is the law."

"As indeed it is in England, Sir," snapped Miss Simpson, suddenly feeling that, for the first time, she was on strong ground to fight her tormentor.

The inspector clapped a hand to his forehead:

"Then surely you know to file one?"

"As indeed we did, and he is buried here."

"But my clerk can find no record of it, in the village," repeated the inspector with a puzzled frown. "You say he is buried here. I should like to see a certificate, please – where is it?"

Miss Simpson hesitated for a moment, then opened her desk drawer and produced the certificate. She handed it across to the inspector who looked at it with a puzzled frown, then held it

up to the light as if inspecting the watermark of the paper on which the form was printed:

"This is not the signature of the local doctor?"

Miss Simpson drew herself up and snapped:

"Indeed, Sir, it is not."

"And why not?"

"Because," said Miss Simpson haughtily. "He was not the doctor who saw to the case."

The inspector frowned down at the certificate:

"I'm afraid, Miss Simpson, I cannot read this name, in fact I can read very little of this scrawl, it appears to be written in a very old-fashioned script."

If he heard Janet's sudden intake of breath, he gave no sign. Miss Simpson snapped:

"I cannot help that."

Janet leant forward quickly, before Miss Simpson made the inspector lose his temper again:

"It was a Doctor Froheim."

Inspector Heinrich recorded the name very carefully in his little note-pad, then muttered:

"I do not recognise the name."

Miss Simpson snorted:

"Dr. Froheim is the personal physician to the Countess Herritzen."

The inspector frowned silently, his head slightly on one side, then:

"I do not recognise her name, either."

Again, he jotted it carefully in his little book. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Miss Simpson and was amused to note her disdain at his admission that there was a member of the nobility of whom he had not heard. As far as he knew, no such title existed. He debated whether to tell her, but decided against it, for the moment.

He flipped through the other notes in his pad, the notes he had made while questioning Janet:

"To return to the matter of Miss Susan – er – Pelly. I have had most of the details about the girl's disappearance from Miss Playfair, here. Is there anything you might wish to add to what she has told me?"

Miss Simpson shook her head, dumbly. The inspector thought for a moment, then:

"You searched the grounds here?"

"Yes, of course."

"What about the cemetery above, and the Karnstein Castle, were they searched too?"

Miss Simpson dropped at her desk. Janet leant forward and coughed for the inspector's attention. He turned to her, an eyebrow raised, and she said:

"Yes, they have all been searched quite thoroughly; by myself, Miss Simpson – and Mr. Barton."

Heinrich frowned with quick suspicion. Janet had not told him about Giles Barton searching before:

"Mr. Barton searched? I thought that her disappearance was supposed to be a secret?"

Miss Simpson looked up slowly, there was a tear forming in her eye:

"Inspector, it is not generally known, but Giles Barton was my partner. We started the school together."

The inspector nodded. He frowned silently for a moment:

"I understand that you have only moved from England to Styria recently?"

"That is correct, about a month ago."

"Whose idea was it, Miss Simpson, Mr. Barton's or yours?"

Miss Simpson frowned with the effort of recollection, then she spoke softly, as if unravelling the words from her memory as she did so:

"Now that you come to mention it, I think it was Giles' idea, yes, I believe it was."

"Why?"

"I don't know – there is a fashion for foreign boarding schools for English girls."

"Yes," beamed the inspector. "But they are all being opened in Switzerland – why here?"

"I think I can answer that," interposed Janet.

"Please, Miss Playfair."

Janet looked questioningly at Miss Simpson, who sighed and nodded. Janet leant forward:

"Giles Barton's speciality is – was – genealogy, with particular reference to the great families of middle Europe. I believe he was carrying out special research into the Karnstein family."

The inspector did not show by the flicker of an eyelid that he was suddenly excited. He knew all about the ancient history and the evil legends surrounding the family and their castle,

and it dove-tailed the case in with so much else he was investigating.

"Did he tell you all this," asked Miss Simpson plaintively. "He certainly never told me."

"No," said Janet. "Richard – Mr. Lestrange told me."

"Who is Mr. Lestrange," asked the inspector quickly.

"He is of no consequence," snapped Miss Simpson. "He is helping out for a few days – our teacher of English suffered an unfortunate accident on the way here."

It was obvious from her tone of voice that Miss Simpson was an active disapprover of Mr. Lestrange. The inspector made a note of his name in the book:

"Do you know anything else about him?"

"Meaning?" snapped Miss Simpson.

"Meaning, where did he come from, how did he come to be employed by you – even temporarily?"

Miss Simpson sniffed:

"He is a well-known writer of rather lurid ghost stories – and the heir to a British peerage. He happened to be holidaying in the village and offered to help out. I assure you he is of the most respectable background – apart from his books. He has only been here a few days, and I am sure he can tell you nothing."

"I will be the judge of that, Miss Simpson," said the inspector with gentle reproof. "I will speak to this Mr. Lestrange later."

There was a silence, then the inspector broke it by starting another line of questioning:

"Now then, Mr. Barton – where was his body found?"

"In the cemetery." It was Janet who answered.

"In the village cemetery?"

"No," said Janet. She pointed to the window. "In the cemetery by the castle, just up the hill. I can show you, if you like."

The inspector rose:

"I would like that very much, Miss Playfair." He bowed politely to Miss Simpson:

"I think that will be all for now, Miss Simpson. I might want to ask you some more questions later."

"What will you do now?"

"Now? I am going to search the grounds."

He signalled for Janet to precede him to the door, then turned in the doorway to speak to Miss Simpson again, but when he saw her, he thought better of the gesture.

Miss Simpson had put her hands on the desk top, and had laid her head on them as she gave herself up to her tears with abandon.

Outside, in the corridor, as he softly shut the door to Miss Simpson's office, the inspector caught Janet's sleeve :

"Miss Playfair, you said that Miss Pelly disappeared during the night. What time is lights out?"

"Ten o'clock."

"I see, and who checks that the girls are in their rooms at that time?"

"I do."

"Good, good. And you are perfectly sure that Miss Pelly was in her bed when you went in – I mean, she had not already stuffed the pillows in her bed."

"No," smiled Janet, admiring the inspector's minute attention to detail. "When I looked in she wasn't yet ready for bed. I remember distinctly saying good night to her and telling her to hurry up."

"You mean that she was still dressed?"

Janet laughed and blushed :

"Well not exactly, Inspector – in fact she was still in her underwear."

The inspector chuckled :

"Well, I had no intention of asking a question as personal as that, Miss Playfair – you had better lead the way. I would like to go out the front and round the side of the school, so that I can get an idea of the layout on the way."

They went back out of the front door, and the inspector went a little way down the drive, looking up at the front of the building. At last he nodded, and went across the drive, where Janet caught him up. They walked together into the yard that fronted on the stables. Janet looked up at the closed loft window :

"That is the room that Mr. Lestrange has – it was Giles Barton's."

"Good. I will look at it later."

Janet went on :

"Behind the stables is the old well – it's covered over now, and beside it, the path that leads down to the lake and the old boathouse – I searched there myself."

The inspector nodded and Janet led the way round the side of the house and up onto the terrace. The girls were still play-

ing on the lawn. She pointed across the lawn :

"On the left there is a little summerhouse, and on the right, that gap in the trees is the path that leads up to the old cemetery and the castle."

Janet glanced along the terrace and saw Richard sitting on the stone balustrade, staring out at the girls. She averted her gaze in case he turned and saw her looking at him.

The inspector noticed the angry flush that came to her cheek, and smiled :

"Shall we go, Miss Playfair?"

She nodded and led him down the steps and across the lawn to the path that led up to the castle.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Richard glared moodily at Janet and Inspector Heinrich as they walked across the lawn and up the path that led to the old cemetery. He was feeling in a gloomy mood altogether, an abrupt contrast to the night before. Three times already that morning, he had tried to get Mircalla alone so that he might speak to her – even if only to warn her that the police were snooping around, and each time, she had deliberately avoided his signal and had gone out of her way to keep away from him.

Now he stared out moodily, watching her talk to Amanda. As Janet and the inspector disappeared up the path, Mircalla broke away from Amanda and began to walk slowly across to the small summerhouse. She climbed the steps and disappeared inside. Richard waited for a moment, then, trying to look as casual as possible, he got down from his perch, and began to walk down the steps and stroll across the lawn.

None of the girls, he was pleased to see, took any notice of him, they were too wrapped up in their own gossip. He walked the last few yards with more speed, took the steps in two strides, then opened the door quickly.

Mircalla was sitting in the summerhouse, and she looked up abruptly as he entered. She noticed his frown, and asked, without expression :

"What is the matter?"

"Matter," said Richard sullenly. "That is what I was going to ask you."

"Why? What is wrong?" The girl seemed guileless with her question, and Richard was amazed:

"Mircalla, beloved. Last night, in the cemetery. We made love. I was happy, and I thought I had made you happy. We were both in another world, of that I am sure – but since then you have avoided me like the plague. You won't talk to me, you won't even meet my eye when I try to look at you."

As he spoke, he moved forward and took her by the shoulders. She put up her hands to push him away, a fleeting expression of distaste crossing her face:

"Richard, please, I can't – don't question me – I can't explain, I don't want to –"

Richard cut across her, his voice harsh with pleading:

"For God's sake, if you don't love me, then just tell me so. All I'm asking is that you end this agony of my not knowing – Mircalla, tell me."

He grasped her firmly, pressing her to him. Her eyes closed as if she was in sudden pain:

"What must I tell you?"

"That you don't love me," said Richard slowly, deliberately. "Say it, say it – now."

But Mircalla could not reply, she struggled to find the words but they would not come. At last she bowed her head in defeat, and Richard, his scowl turning to a smile of triumph, kissed her passionately, running his hand over her thighs and stomach. She made no resistance, but did not respond with the passion she had shown the night before.

When he drew back, she sighed:

"Richard, I must go – I must."

All his anger had gone and he was entranced by her again. There was no reproach, only regret in his voice:

"Please don't, stay a while longer."

Mircalla managed a smile:

"Richard, you do not understand. My – my aunt is coming here this afternoon."

"The Countess?"

"Yes."

Richard frowned, then his brow cleared and he presented his idea with the enthusiasm of a young boy:

"But that is wonderful, Mircalla. Let me talk to her about us, I am sure –"

Mircalla had drawn back, her face shocked. Now she rasped a single word:

"No."

"I only thought –"

Mircalla managed to turn her look into a smile:

"Richard, please. It would not be correct."[4]

"It is too soon?"

She shook her head:

"Richard, you must swear to me never to speak to her, to tell her of – our love."

"But this is 1870," said Richard, puzzled. "Not 1770. A girl can now do –"

"Swear it, please."[5]

Richard saw the pain on her face and was confused by it. Even so, he had no wish to do anything but serve her, so he said:

"All right. I swear." As she relaxed visibly, he smiled and added. "But only if you will kiss me again."

She came to him this time with no indecision, and no struggle for her lips.

Janet showed the inspector to the cemetery, then watched him as he silently went about his work. His eyes darted everywhere, mentally judging distances, measuring, getting each spot pictured in relation to the others. Eventually he nodded with satisfaction and turned to her:

"Thank you, Miss Playfair, you have been most helpful to me, most helpful. I will carry on by myself now."

Janet hesitated:

"If you want me, I'll –"[1]

Heinrich waved his hand in dismissal, his mind was already elsewhere:

"Yes, yes, my dear."[2]

It was as if she was no longer there. She felt a wave of frustrated and ridiculous anger as he turned his back on her and knelt to peer at a tomb – a tomb round which all the grass was trampled, whose earth was disturbed.

At last, she turned and flounced from the cemetery and down the path to the school grounds. Inspector Heinrich looked up to watch her go, and he smiled. A nice girl, that, but people always got in the way when one was trying to observe.

As soon as he was sure that she was far enough ahead for him not to be disturbed by her again, he turned and walked briskly through the archway and into the castle grounds. He walked round the side of the castle, up the steps and in the half-open entrance door. He shivered a little at the gloom inside, and was not without a sudden pang of fear, which his professional instincts quickly suppressed.

He went into the chapel and looked round. All the evidence of the Black Mass was still there, he noted with interest, but he was not shocked. He merely made a few notes, before turning briskly on his heel and leaving the building, rounding the side again to re-enter the cemetery. He did not notice the dark cloaked tall figure who stood in the driveway, and, having seen him leave, dived into the trees to follow him.

Now that he was on his own, the inspector decided to make an inspection of the places she had pointed out that interested him far more than the cemetery. He came briskly down the path to the lawn that ran from the house, and was amused to see two people leaving the summerhouse.

First there came a girl. She looked quickly from left to right, did not see him, then crossed the lawn and went into the building. Only when she had disappeared, did the man appear. He was tall, youngish – late twenties, and he was frowning in the direction in which the girl had disappeared. He began to walk to the house, changed direction midway and went towards the stables instead.

Heinrich smiled to himself. An intrigue might or might not be of significance, but he was glad that he had seen it.

He went across the lawn in the direction that the man had taken, but skirted the stables and moved down the path that led to the lake-side and the old boathouse. The dark, cloaked figure followed him from the trees, skirting the lawn ; not venturing forth into the open.

The inspector went into the boathouse and looked around. There were upturned boats, and in one corner a work bench, surrounded by the shavings which showed that a carpenter had been at work.

The inspector spotted something almost at once. Whereas the rest of the floor was devoid of shavings, there was a small scattering of them by the end of one of the boats. It could mean nothing, or it could mean much. He bent down quickly and ran his fingers over the ground – and was rewarded for his sharp

attention to detail as he saw that the shaving masked spots of dried blood.

He went outside and looked round. Obviously the body had been moved and hidden. He glanced speculatively at the lake, then shook his head to dismiss the thought. If the body were in the lake, it would have come up by now, somewhere – but where else was there.

He frowned in thought as he looked up the path. He could just see the outline of the stables through the trees. Then he snapped his fingers in triumph – of course, the well.

He hurried up the path, and located the well quite easily. He smiled with satisfaction as he noticed that it was hidden from the school, and was behind the blank wall of the stables. His researches would, with any luck, go unobserved.

With a huge effort he got the old wooden cover off the well, and it fell to the ground with a clatter. He leant over into the interior and peered down, but it was black as night. The inspector picked up a stone, dropped it and began to count. Instead of hitting water as he had expected, it hit the ground with a thud – one hundred feet down.

He inspected the rope that was coiled around the cross-beam and began to unwind it. It seemed strong enough to support him, but with the greatest care, he tested it thoroughly before he coiled a loop round his waist, checked that the cross-beam would not unwind the rope with too great a speed, because of his weight, and lowered himself into the inky blackness – still unaware of the coal-black angry eyes watching him from the trees.

Miss Simpson looked up in agitation as the Matron, Miss Carstairs, burst in to say that the Countess's carriage was in the drive. She braced herself and hurried to the front door. Perhaps the doctor would be with her and could put that dreadful inspector's mind at rest about Giles Barton's death.

The Countess was stepping down as Miss Simpson crossed the gravelled drive. The coachman was as usual on the box, swathed in his black cloak. The Countess's smile turned to a frown as she saw Miss Simpson's agitation:

"My dear lady, what is the matter?"

"Ah, Countess, it is nothing – is your doctor not with you?"

The Countess seemed for a moment a little taken aback by the question, and it was only after a moment that she replied:

"No, I am afraid he has been detained elsewhere."

Miss Simpson's hands began to knead together and the Countess summoned a smile:

"Come now, something is troubling you. Let us go to your office and you may tell me all about it, and I will see what I can do to help."

Miss Simpson turned and quickly led the way. On her back, the Countess's smile turned to one of contempt for the stupid Englishwoman.

Once inside the office with the door shut, Miss Simpson felt better. She settled in her chair and waited until her visitor was seated opposite her, before blurting out the story of the inspector and the missing Susan Pelley.

The Countess maintained an elegant calm, the only expression she gave was one of surprise when Miss Simpson told her that the inspector had not heard of either her or her doctor. Miss Simpson ended breathlessly:

"I cannot tell you how grateful I am to be able to tell you all this. I just don't know which way to turn, and your help has been invaluable."

"Think nothing of it," beamed the Countess. "It is of no consequence."

"But this inspector – what am I to do about him?"

"You must not fret so much, Miss Simpson – so a police inspector has come here – I suppose that they must do their work. But he will not make any trouble for you, of that I can assure you now. Be calm."

Miss Simpson clung to the Countess's words like a drowning woman clutching a lifebelt. She was very close to panic, and now, she bleated:

"If only I could be sure of that, Countess. He was – he was such a horrible little man. He treated me as though I were some kind of criminal."

"Don't fret yourself," sighed the Countess as Miss Simpson gave way to tears.

"But he bullied me, and – I've only tried to do what I thought was right by the girls – for the school."

The Countess shifted in her seat. She was becoming a trifle bored by the other woman's whining, but it did not show on her features:

"I'm sure you have, dear lady. Now don't you worry about him any more."

"But he's searching the grounds now," squeaked Miss Simpson.

The Countess raised an interrogative eyebrow:

"What is there for him to find?"

With infinite slowness. Inspector Heinrich edged his way down the well into the inky blackness. He could still see nothing below, though he knew that he must be nearing the dried bed of the well. He glanced up, and could see the line of rope stretching to the receding top of the well.

A few moments later, his feet touched the dried bed of the well, and he over-balanced. As he put out a hand to steady himself, it touched something cold and soft.

The inspector fumbled in his pocket for candle and tinder. He was never without them. A moment's groping in the dark ness and he had lit the candle.

The body of a girl lay before him, and it was her hair that he had touched when he slipped. He knelt down for a closer inspection. She was young, and her completely naked body was badly bruised by the fall down the well-shaft. But it was her face that caught his interest. On it was an expression of pure animal terror, as if she had been frightened to death.

The inspector leaned forward and took the girl's jaw to turn her head so that he might inspect the neck. Despite his training and constant view of sudden death in its most horrible forms, he gasped at what he saw – the twin punctures on the neck, the dried blood round the edges – the marks of the kiss of the undead, the curse of a vampire.

The inspector made a cursory inspection of the rest of the body, then blew out the candle and began to slowly climb back up to the surface of the well.

Above him, the figure that had been watching from the trees moved cautiously forward to the well-head and peered down into the gloom, taking great care that he should not be seen from below.

He saw the outline of the inspector making his slow ascent to the surface, and a smile crossed the thin, pale face.

From his pocket, the cloaked man produced a large pocket-knife, and he leant forward and up and began to saw methodically through the rope at the top.

The inspector was nearing the surface, and the interior of the well was getting lighter. He glanced up suddenly as a

shadow seemed to fall across him. Heinrich sucked in his breath. From where he was clinging to the rope, he could see a clawlike hand grasping it, another wielding a knife as the owner of the hands sawed through the rope.

The inspector felt the beginnings of sweat on his hands and brow. With a great effort, he began to climb more quickly, never taking his eyes off the knife. If he could not reach the surface in time, he would be dead for sure.

The knife continued its deadly work. The inspector felt more confident. Just another moment and he would be able to grasp the top wall of the well, just one more good heave.

The hands and knife were abruptly withdrawn from sight. The rope now hung from two strained threads that were beginning to unravel. As they snapped, the inspector's fingers scrambled on the edge of the well-head. For a moment, hope beat wildly in his heart as he thought he had a purchase on the top.

Then his fingers slipped, caught, slipped again, and the doomed policeman began to fall, hitting the sides of the well as he went. The second bump pulped his skull, and he fell across the body of the dead girl, already a corpse.

Up above, the well-cover was heaved back into place, then the cloaked figure darted back into the trees.

The Countess sat bolt upright in her chair, suddenly transfixed by a sentence in Miss Simpson's continued babbling. She cut across the flow of verbiage:

"You wrote a letter – what letter?"

Miss Simpson was startled out of her self-pity by the harsh suddenness of the question:

"To Mr. Pelly. He is Susan's father. An American. He is staying in Vienna at this moment. The inspector insisted that I should write – stood over me while I did so."

"Has it been posted," snapped the Countess, leaning forward expectantly.

Miss Simpson sighed:

"Yes. Miss Playfair took the inspector up to the old cemetery and then was supposed to go to the village straight away."

The Countess cursed under her breath. Her coach had passed the gym mistress at the entrance to the drive. To hide her face, the Countess turned away to the door for a moment. Miss Simpson burst into tears yet again:

"I shall be ruined. The scandal will close us down. That man Heinrich. He's determined to ruin me."

The Countess whirled back to her:

"Please, don't concern yourself with Inspector Heinrich." The words were a command rather than comfort.

"If you could possibly use your influence, Countess, I would be more than grateful."

The Countess snapped definitely:

"I can promise you this, Miss Simpson. You will not hear any more from Inspector Heinrich. I will see to that."

"But what shall I do?" wailed Miss Simpson.

"Be quiet for a moment. I must think."

The Countess rose, and, with a deep frown, she walked over to the window and stared out at the lawn. Behind her, Miss Simpson sniffled as she endeavoured to recover her shattered composure. At last, the Countess turned and snatched some paper from the desk-top tray to put it in front of the principal:

"First, you must write another letter to Mr. Pelly."

"But what can I say."

The Countess replied firmly:

"You must tell him that now his daughter has been found and that she is dead."

Miss Simpson gasped and looked up at the Countess. The woman's coal-black eyes caught her own, locked on them, held them, and Miss Simpson felt her energy draining away, under the power of the other woman's stare:

"But . . ." she started weakly.

"There should be no further inquiries," said the Countess with slow firmness. "Just so long as you enclose a death certificate, properly signed and witnessed."

Miss Simpson passed a hand ineffectually across her eyes. She felt trapped by the Countess's stare, and her brain was becoming fuddled:

"But why – how?"

The Countess smiled, a thin tight smile:

"You mean, what did she die of?"

At that moment the office door opened and a deep, rasping voice said:

"You will say that she died of a heart attack."

Miss Simpson gave a little gasp of surprise and looked up at the newcomer. The tall dark, pale man stood in the doorway. He was not looking at her, but he nodded towards the Countess,

who acknowledged the nod with a slight smile.

Miss Simpson looked from one to the other with a dazed bewilderment. She was confused. The Countess had said that her doctor was not with her, and now here he was.

The Countess turned to stare at her again. Miss Simpson quailed under the power of her eyes, then picked up her pen and began to write.

When Janet Playfair got back from posting her letter in the village, the old black coach was gone. She tried to go and see Miss Simpson, to make apology for unleashing the police on the poor woman, but Miss Carstairs told her that Miss Simpson was ill and had taken to her bed, leaving orders that she was not to be disturbed.

Janet wandered through the grounds of the school. She went first to see Richard, but his room was empty. Then she decided to look for the inspector – at least she would have the excuse that she wished to report that her mission was accomplished and the letter to Mr. Pelly had been posted.

But though she searched high and low, he was nowhere to be found.

She asked several of the girls if they had seen him, but they all replied that they had seen him walking up the path to the cemetery with her, then coming back down a few minutes after she had done so. He had walked then down the path to the lakeside and the boathouse, but they had not seen him after that.

Janet hurried down the path to the boathouse, past the well. But when she got to the lakeside, there was still no sign of the man.

She came slowly back up to the school, a much-puzzled girl. She walked round the front of the school again, as the inspector's driver brought his carriage up the drive – dead on four o'clock.

She walked over:

"I've been looking for the inspector myself. He seems to have gone. I expect he's walked back to the village."

The man grunted and shrugged, as much as to say, that it was not unusual for his superior to be unreliable:

"I shouldn't be surprised if he's walked on somewhere else, Miss. He's always doing this sort of thing to me. Thank you, anyway, Miss."

Janet watched the carriage disappear out of sight, a worried frown on her brow. It seemed more than an unreliable quirk that the inspector had gone like that. He had at least implied that after he went through the grounds, he would want to question everybody, yet he had not done so.

She tried to comfort herself with the thought that perhaps he had found some clue to the whereabouts of Susan Pelly that had caused him to hurry on – perhaps even was following the girl herself. But it was poor comfort and she went back into the school building.

Miss Carstairs was in the hall, and Janet said:

"Miss Carstairs."

"Yes, Miss."

"After the inspector left, did he come back and see Miss Simpson again?"

Miss Carstairs shook her head:

"No, Miss, he hasn't been back here. The Countess came a little later, then the doctor. Miss Simpson saw them, then went to her bed as soon as they had left."

Janet frowned – the Countess had been again, and her doctor with her. And the inspector had stated quite definitely that he had not heard of either of them – stated it in a way that implied they did not exist.

"Will that be all, Miss?"

Janet looked startled as Miss Carstairs cut across her thoughts. She blushed and smiled:

"Yes, Miss Carstairs, I'm sorry to have kept you."

She watched the matron waddle up the stairs, then her preoccupied frown returned.

How she got through the evening routine, Janet was never able to recall. But she was in charge in Miss Simpson's absence, and she had to get the girls through supper and to bed.

At supper there was again no sign of Richard, but Janet determined that despite her previous rebuff from him, as soon as lights out had come and gone, she would seek him out in his room, to lay this new mystery before him.

After the call of lights out, she waited for ten minutes, then made a check down the corridor to make sure that all the remaining girls were safely in bed.

She made a special point of checking on Mircalla, who was

now sleeping alone, since Susan's disappearance, and the girl appeared to be asleep.

Janet went down the corridor, and Mircalla listened for the sound of receding footsteps. Then she got up quietly, put her robe around her and went cautiously into the corridor. Janet was just at the top of the stairs, and the girl followed her cautiously down the stairs, and along the corridor to the side door. Janet slipped through and Mircalla watched her cross the yard to the stables. She glanced up and saw the light in Richard's window.

As soon as Janet had disappeared and began to climb the dark stairs to the loft, Mircalla streaked across the yard and into the stables.

Richard was at Giles's desk, making another study of his fearful collection of terror. He started slightly at the knock on the door, then smiled to himself. No vampire would ever knock

"Come in."

He hoped against hope that his visitor would be Mircalla, but he did not let the disappointment show on his face when Janet entered. He rose formally:

"Ah, Miss Playfair. What can I do for you – a drink perhaps?"

Janet cast her eyes down and shook her head:

"No thanks, Richard." She looked up abruptly: "I don't know which way to turn."

Richard sighed inwardly, then aloud:

"Sit down, you seem to be worried."

Janet collapsed, rather than sat down, in one of the comfortable chairs. She felt all the life knocked out of her.

Outside the room, Mircalla crouched down to catch the conversation.

"It's Inspector Heinrich," began Janet. "I know you'll think I'm being silly, but he's disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Richard looked as if he was going to laugh, and Janet coloured angrily.

"He brought me back from the village this morning, and questioned Miss Simpson. He then proposed that he was going to search the grounds, and I showed him the cemetery. He wanted to continue the search on his own, so I went to the village with the letter to Mr. Pelly, telling him that Susan was missing. When I came back, he'd vanished."

Richard nodded:

"He probably found some clue and raced off in pursuit of it."

Janet nodded:

"That's what I thought at first, but it's been worrying me. He said that he wanted to question everybody, but I've asked the girls and he didn't speak to any of them, didn't go to see Miss Simpson again, either – did he come to question you?"

Richard shook his head, and Janet went on:

"There you are, then, I knew something had happened. He made a special note of your name in his book. He was definitely going to see you."

Richard sighed:

"Well, the last time I saw him was when he went up the path to the cemetery with you."

Janet looked up, her eyes filling with tears:

"Richard, I'm frightened. Please help me."

Richard spoke gently, but his words brought no comfort:

"Listen, Janet, the inspector is conducting an investigation – anyway I thought I advised you not to go to the police. It's too late to talk about that now, but I'm sure that he is a competent man and I think we shouldn't worry, but should let him get on with it in his own way."

Janet hated being patronised – especially by Richard. She rose angrily:

"I thought that at least you would help."

"And I keep telling you that you're letting your imagination run riot."

Janet shook her head in despair. She was close to tears:

"Oh, I know. That's what everyone keeps telling me – everyone except Inspector Heinrich. He didn't seem to think so."

"Didn't he," snapped Richard, suddenly angry and impatient himself. "We've heard precious little of his so-called investigation though, haven't we?"

"And I can guess why," flared the girl, rising. "That precious Countess has done some string-pulling in high places –"

"What the hell's she got to do with it?"

Janet frowned:

"I'm beginning to wonder that myself. Ever since her precious niece turned up here, there's been trouble."

Richard went very red and advanced on her threateningly, waving his hands in the air:

"Now, for heaven's sake, don't you bring Mircalla into this, I'm warning you."

"You're warning me," shouted Janet bitterly. "Well, you just listen to me, Richard Lestrange, because now I'm warning you. You're besotted with her – just like Giles was."

There was a moment's silence, then Richard paled and frowned:

"Giles?"

Janet turned the knife angrily:

"Yes, Giles. Didn't you know that? Well, he was always creeping round after her – trying to sketch her – he couldn't keep his eyes off her from the moment she arrived – couldn't keep his hands off her too, I shouldn't wonder."

Richard towered over her, as if he was about to hit her, and she stopped speaking abruptly:

"That's enough of that filthy talk."

Janet took a pace out of reach, then went on, with renewed courage:

"And I'll tell you something else you don't know, Susan was infatuated with her too."

Richard sneered with contempt, but his voice was quieter, as if she had made him suddenly unsure:

"What sort of filthy accusations do you think you're making now. I'd be very sure before I said a thing like that."

Janet sighed. Her resolve was pricked like a balloon. She felt suddenly very tired, suddenly aware that her love for Richard might have pushed her over the top in her accusations about Mircalla. She lowered her eyes and did not speak for a moment. When she looked up, her voice was quiet:

"All I'm saying is that Giles is dead – and I suspect that Susan is dead, too. That's what the inspector thought as well."

"Nonsense."

"It may be nonsense to you, but I'm just telling you what I feel. Now, I don't trust the Countess. She seems to have Miss Simpson in her power, and it looks like she can control the police as well. And I'm saying that, unless someone does something about it, before long, we're going to suffer another tragedy – and, if you want to know who I think is the next likely victim, I think it's going to be you."

Richard snorted with disbelief, but behind his exterior, his mind was troubled:

"I'm the one who should be worrying about that – not you."[2]

Janet took a deep breath. She suddenly looked pale and ice-cold. She said softly:

"Except that I happen to love you."

Richard's jaw dropped, and he stared at her, suddenly shaken by her revelation. Janet held her head up, seemed relieved now that she had spoken out loud about her secret. Her voice held a certain edge of contempt as she went on:

"Please don't let it bother you. You seem to have been living in another world these past few days – you've never even noticed a thing. But please, Richard, if you continue to be blind to everything else, please don't be blind to what might happen to you."

"But . . . you never said . . ." Richard sat down suddenly.

There was a long silence from within the room, and Mircalla, suddenly afraid that Janet was leaving, slipped away down the stairs and across the yard. On her face was a thin smile. Something would have to be done about the gym mistress. Mircalla went down the corridor, then up the stairs. At the top, she paused, then stepped back into the shadows to wait.

In the small room above the stables. Janet came forward and knelt for a moment by Richard's chair, her voice filled with love:

"Please, Richard, don't be a fool."

He stared up at her, still uncomprehending. Janet leant forward and kissed him lightly on the forehead, but he did not move, made no gesture that would have held her there. Almost in tears, she rose and left the room. She closed the door softly behind her and sobbed her way down the stairs.

Out in the yard, she paused for a moment to dry her eyes and compose herself. Then, with a swift glance up at the lighted window, she went back into the house and along the dark corridor to the hall.

As she moved up the stairs, her worries all flooded back. Suddenly, near the top, she stopped with a jerk, and gave a little gasp of surprise as a figure stepped suddenly forward from the shadows.

With an effort, she kept her balance, then felt a shudder of fear down her spine as she recognised Mircalla smiling down at her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

For a moment the two women stared silently at one another in the gloom. Janet was fighting to control her sudden fear, Mircalla maintaining her strange empty smile. At last, Janet found herself able to speak:

"Mircalla? What are you doing up out of bed."

For an answer, as Janet, who had started to move forward again, reached the top of the stairs, Mircalla swayed forward a pace, then clutched her side. The smile had disappeared, as if a wave of pain had overcome the girl:

"Miss Playfair . . . I don't feel well."

In spite of everything, Janet's face softened and she moved forward to support Mircalla, before turning her to support her along the corridor to her room.

It was at that moment, that Mircalla suddenly turned her head and her deep coal-black eyes met the teacher's, held them. Janet felt a sudden wave of dizziness, as if all her strength were suddenly drained from her and into the girl. She dropped her arms from Mircalla's side, then stood still, half-dazed, unable to move or think straight.

Mircalla took a pace backwards, her eyes still holding Janet's, and the bleak smile reappeared. She started to go slowly backwards down the corridor, and, as she did so, her eyes seemed to command the other woman to follow, pace for pace.

They moved slowly down the corridor, only a small part of Janet's brain still active, still fighting the takeover of her mind.

Mircalla was pleased, Janet's face had gone completely blank, even the first look of puzzlement had vanished. She reached her door, halted and groped her hand out to the handle, her eyes not leaving Janet's for a moment, not allowing the spell of hypnosis to be broken.

The door swung back, and Mircalla began to back slowly into the room, Janet still following like a zombie.

As soon as Janet was inside and clear of the door, Mircalla halted her, and reached round her to close the door softly. Then she backed slowly to the edge of the bed:

"Please . . . help . . . me."

Janet reacted like the automaton she had become. She moved

slowly forward and stood close to Mircalla. The other girl reached up, and for a moment, she stroked the soft front of Janet's blouse. She could feel that Janet wore nothing underneath this outer covering, and, under the material, her nipples were hardening from the massage.

Very gently, Mircalla began to unbutton the blouse, revealing Janet's small, rounded breasts, now almost come to hardness under her touch.

The girl leant forward to kiss her victim between the breasts, her lips curling back to reveal the fangs of her curse. As she went forward, something glinted in the valley between the breasts, and Mircalla suddenly screamed and backed away in alarm.

Round Janet's neck, on a tiny golden chain, hung a small, gold cross.

Janet stood quite still for a moment, then her hands reached up, automatically. She was still in Mircalla's power, but she held the cross in her fingers and brought it forward, as if offering it as a gift to the other girl.

Mircalla's face glittered with a sweat of fear, and her eyes dilated with horror. Janet began to walk towards her, and the girl staggered away, as if in sudden pain.

With a sudden snarl, more animal than human, she raced for the door, opened it, and ran out and down the corridor, letting it slam behind her.

It was the noise of the door slamming that woke Janet with a start from her trance. She felt suddenly dizzy, and put her hand up to her forehead, as she stared at the panels of the closed door. She had been with someone, but she couldn't remember who.

She realized with a start that her other hand was leaning against her exposed breast, holding her tiny cross. Quickly she re-buttoned her blouse, and checked that she was neat. It was then that she glanced round, completely disorientated and realized that she was in Mircalla's room – but of the girl there was no sign.

Janet shuddered with a nameless fear, but still she could remember nothing of what had happened since she had climbed the stairs back to her room.

Her mind in a jumble, Janet went to her own room, undressed, and slipped into bed. She fell at once into a heavy dreamless sleep.

The next day, things at the school were back to normal, if, as Janet thought later, the situation in which they all found themselves with varying degrees of awareness, could be described as normal.

Miss Simpson had returned to her desk, albeit still shaken by her experiences. Janet was upset by what she had told Richard, and avoided his eyes whenever they met during the day. Of the events of the night before, after she had left his room, she had no recollection.

The day produced no new surprises, but it was a tired and relieved Janet who checked that all the girls were in their rooms and conducted lights out that evening.

As soon as the girls were safely tucked away for the night, she went to her own room, and went straight to bed.

It was the morning after that Miss Simpson's latest ordeal began. At about ten o'clock a coach arrived at the school – but this time the occupant was not the Countess, but Mr. Pelly, Susan's father. He was accompanied by Professor Hertz, a pathologist friend from Vienna. He asked the Professor to remain in the coach while he went in to question Miss Simpson.

The principal found herself faced by a tough looking American in his middle forties, the sort of man who would allow no evasions. He had received both letters and he was an upset, angry and puzzled man. He listened impatiently to Miss Simpson's apologies, then banged his hand down on the desk:

"Miss Simpson. I cannot accept your apologies – and the whole thing is most unsatisfactory. Yesterday morning I learnt that my daughter, Susan, had been missing for three days before you even considered it important enough to write to me."

"I tried to explain that in my letter," bleated Miss Simpson.

Pelly ignored the interruption:

"Then, by a later post, on the same day, I receive another note from you telling me that she had been found – dead."

Miss Simpson turned her head away. His enunciation of the last word had almost a physical force. Pelly leaned forward to her, his face brutal with rage:

"I am not going to mince my words. You don't say passed away except when somebody's had a good life and moved on. My daughter was a healthy kid, Miss Simpson. I can't believe that she had a heart attack."

Miss Simpson looked close to fainting. She kneaded her hands ineffectually:

"But the doctor –"

Pelly slammed down his hand again to cut her off:

"What doctor?"

"Why, Doctor Froheim."

"Who the hell is this doctor?" shouted Pelly. "The moment I got the news, don't you think that I tried to check with him. Naturally, I wanted to know all the details – how a thing like this could happen. I had others check for me to try to find him too, everywhere in Vienna. I couldn't even find his name."

Miss Simpson made a great effort and rose. Her voice was hard, though unsteady:

"I don't think I understand, Mr. Pelly. What exactly is it you are suggesting?"

Pelly sighed:

"I'm not making any suggestions. I'm just trying to state facts: One: I have no proof that my daughter is dead. Two: when I'm given the proof, I want to know how she died. Because I don't accept this certificate you've given me as evidence. I want to know what really happened."

Miss Simpson fluttered nervously:

"What . . . What can I do?"

Pelly's voice was hard as he answered:

"You don't have to do a single damned thing, ma'am. You've already done enough. You had no right to have my daughter buried without waiting for my instructions."

"But you said yourself that you were going away," shrieked Miss Simpson, a drowning woman clutching at a last straw. "You said that –"

Pelly cut her off with brutal force:

"But as you can see, I was soon contacted. The point is that I'm not satisfied and I hate to have doubts in my mind, especially concerning my own daughter. I have brought with me Professor Hertz, who is a famous pathologist – and I have here an authority for an exhumation."

As he spoke, he drew a signed document from his inside pocket and threw it onto the desk between them. Miss Simpson moved her hands away from it, lest it should contaminate her. Her eyes widened with shock. She hardly heard Mr. Pelly's next words:

"I understand that the graveyard is just up the hill from here.

Well Professor Hertz and I are going up there now to dig my daughter up – and woe betide you, if you lied to me."

The door slammed behind him, jerking Miss Simpson out of her daze. She burst into an abandoned weeping. Then tried to think what she would be able to say, if anything, when the bereaved father came back from the cemetery without having found his daughter's grave.

After a while, she had cried her weary frame dry, and she cleaned up her face with a handkerchief. It was as she was just finishing, that the door opened again. Miss Simpson looked up in alarm, then smiled suddenly and relaxed as she saw it was the Countess.

The newcomer swept into the room and seated herself. She looked firm and controlled, all the things that Miss Simpson was no longer:

"What is the matter, Miss Simpson?"

If the Countess was weary of asking this oft-repeated question, she tried not to show it.

"Mr. Pelly has arrived. He came as soon as he learnt of his daughter's death – that letter you had me write, and the death certificate."

"And?"

Miss Simpson frowned:

"But we have no body, Countess. He and a pathologist from Vienna have gone up to the graveyard to dig Susan's grave up – here is the exhumation order."

"So what is the matter?" sighed the Countess. "Everything seems to be in order."

Miss Simpson collapsed forward, shaking her head from side to side:

"I just don't know any more – I just don't understand. It's all like a terrible nightmare – the grave – those men digging – but we don't know where Susan is."

The Countess managed a smile of comfort and leaned forward to take Miss Simpson's hand:

"But we do."

Miss Simpson stopped her wailing and looked up at the Countess, disbelief written all over her bewildered face. The other woman went on softly:

"You had had so much trouble already. I didn't want you to be worried by it all. I had everything taken care of for you."

"But, when the doctor made out the certificate . . ."

The Countess summoned up a light laugh of surprise :

"Do you think that my own personal physician would sign a death certificate dishonestly – without having first inspected the corpse, or had it identified."

Miss Simpson babbled an incoherent apology, and the Countess said gently :

"It is not Mr. Pelly with whom we have to concern ourselves. It is you. You must rest."

She took Miss Simpson by the shoulders and helped her out of her chair, before leading her towards the door :

"Now, why don't you go upstairs and lie down. Leave me to deal with everything when Mr. Pelly returns."

Miss Simpson turned to mouth words of grateful thanks, but none came. As she tottered down the corridor to the stairs, the Countess watched her go with a look of cool contempt, before returning to the office to wait for Pelly.

When he left Miss Simpson, Pelly marched from the building, pushing the ineffectual Miss Carstairs aside at the door, and crossed the drive to his carriage. He leant in the window, where Hertz, a short man with a greying beard and glasses, looked at him quizzically.

"Come, Professor," said Pelly. "The woman in there is a fool, if not a rogue. Let's go to the graveyard."

Hertz nodded equably and climbed down from the coach :

"I have sent the undertaker's men up there to wait for us – the ones who were in charge of the burial."

The two men walked in silence up the hill to the cemetery. There were two men already there – one tall and gaunt, with a thin bloodless face that made Pelly shudder inwardly, the other, a short more thickset man, with an evil squint in his eye.

They were standing by a freshly covered grave, and, when Pelly gave the order, they began to dig.

As their spades took out first earth, Pelly walked a short distance away. Hertz smiled and followed him :

"This is a bad time for you, my friend, but do not worry, it will not take long, and I will try to make the ordeal as painless as possible."

Pelly smiled grimly, and nodded his heart-felt thanks to his old friend.

It took only ten minutes to bring up the coffin, though to the dead girl's father, it seemed like an eternity. When they had

finally lifted it out of the grave, and rested it, head upwards against the mound of earth that had covered it for so short a time, the two gravediggers stepped back as Hertz and Pelly came forward.

The professor prised the lid off the coffin so that it slid to one side, then looked in at the dead girl.

Her face seemed at peace, her eyes closed. From the way the limbs had been laid out beneath the shroud, Professor Hertz could see at a glance that her body was shattered. That alone would have explained her death.

Pelly turned away to restrain his grief, and, after a concerned glanced at his friend, the Professor leant forward, and moved the girl's head to one side, so that the broken neck lolled away.

He frowned at what he saw – the twin bite marks of a vampire on her neck. But he said nothing to Pelly, and put the head back in place, before stepping back and nodding at the macabre pair of gravediggers.

He took Pelly's arm :

"Let's go back, my friend."

The two men walked very slowly out of the cemetery and back down the hill. Both were silent, Pelly as he wrestled with his grief ; Hertz as his mind raced over the meaning of the marks on the girl's neck.

Pelly burst into Miss Simpson's office, Hertz hard at his heels, then stopped short in surprise to be confronted by an imperious looking newcomer in the principal's chair :

"Who the hell are you ?"

The Countess's glance would have quailed any but an American. As Hertz shut the door, she snapped :

"I am the Countess Herritzen."

"Where in hell's name is Miss Simpson."

"Miss Simpson is quite exhausted by the pressures of the last few days. The doctor has ordered her to bed with a sedative – says she must have absolute rest. She can be disturbed for no reason."

Pelly cursed, then :

"The doctor ? Whose doctor ?"

"Mine."

"You mean the doctor who signed my daughter's death certificate ?"

"Yes," snapped the Countess.

"And who I find is not registered to practise medicine in Vienna?"

The Countess drew herself up with dignity, as if the personal honour of her family had been impugned, rather than the credentials of her medical adviser:

"Doctor Froheim does not practise in Vienna."

Pelly leant forward on the desk, his voice heavy with irony as he tried to control his temper:

"I have my doubts, madame, whether Doctor Froheim should be allowed to practise anywhere – whether indeed he does. My daughter had severe body injuries."

Without a moment of hesitation, the Countess nodded:

"Of course."

Pelly gasped in surprise, staggered bby her calm. He took a moment to recover his breath, then:

"Of course? But these injuries were not mentioned in the death certificate, nor in the letter Miss Simpson wrote to me to accompany it. There has obviously been a deliberate evasion of the truth, and you say to me, of course."

The Countess glanced down contritely at the desk, but said nothing.

"I am waiting for an answer."

She looked up suddenly, concern written on her features:

"I wish you would not persist in this attitude. I have no wish to distress you further."

"Distress me and be damned," shouted Pelly.

The Countess rose, cool and dignified. She walked round the desk to face Pelly:

"Very well. Your daughter died when her heart failed. That is what Doctor Froheim said, and it is up to your expert to disprove it."

"And the injuries, woman, the injuries?"

"As I was about to say, her other injuries were caused when she threw herself –"

"When she what?"

The Countess brushed aside the interruption and went on remorselessly:

"... when she threw herself from the top of Castle Karnstein, to her death."

Pelly sat down suddenly, paling:

"Suicide."

"Suicide is not a pleasant fact for any father to be told."

Pelly put his head in his hands, and Hertz moved forward to comfort the stricken man:

"Oh, my God."

The Countess went on, more softly:

"In my own opinion, Miss Simpson was quite right in her vain attempt to shield you from more grief and pain than was necessary – and the rest of her girls from the unpleasant gossip such news would bring."

Pelly looked up at her, his eyes red:

"Suicide? But why?"

"I understand her home life was not entirely happy," said the Countess. "You are, I believe, divorced from your wife – and quite recently?"

"What? Yes – but Susan . . ."

The Countess was cool. She remained silent for a moment, then said gently, but with a deliberate, underlying malice:

"I believe that nowadays, these unfortunate incidents are regarded as being responsible for much unhappiness in the children of such a broken marriage."

Pelly was stung by the words. White as a sheet, he rose and for a moment it looked as if he would lash out at the woman:

"It's not true!"

"But Mr. Pelly." The Countess stood her ground, cool and unafraid. "It has happened."

"But I don't believe it. I won't. I can't."

The Countess turned to Doctor Hertz, as if appealing for his help in calming the distraught man before her. Politely, though there were many questions that he too would have liked answered, he fell in with her hint:

"Come, my friend. Let us go back to the village. There is nothing more that we can do here. A night's rest at the local inn should see you all right."

"But Hertz, there are so many more questions."

"And we can deal with them tomorrow," said the man in a kindly tone. "Come on."

He helped Pelly towards the door. In the doorway, the American turned, tears on his cheeks:

"Don't think that you have heard the last of me, ma'am. You can tell Miss Simpson that I will call again tomorrow to clear this matter up once and for all."

The door closed on them, and the Countess smiled quietly to

herself. Miss Simpson might have to wrestle with the brute on the morrow, but the Countess knew that she would be far away.

Pelly and Hertz were silent until their coach was well down the road towards the village. Then Pelly said wearily:

"Tomorrow, Hertz, my friend, you must take me up to the castle, so that I may see where my daughter died."

"I will, I promise."

"I did not look properly, was she badly battered."

Hertz frowned:

"Yes, I am afraid so." He was silent for a moment, then said with a puzzled frown: "There were also marks on her neck as if she had been bitten by some wild animal."

"Wild animal?"

Hertz nodded, then:

"I wonder if you would drop me at the police station on our way to the inn. I should like to have a word with this Inspector Heinrich if he is available."

"Shouldn't I come too?"

"That will not be necessary. It is just something I want to check up on."

The coach duly dropped him at the police house, then went on to drop Pelly at the inn. The American booked two rooms, one for himself, the other for his friend, then went upstairs to lie down for a while, but he found the loneliness oppressive, and was soon seated in a corner of the bar, brooding as he sipped a glass of the local wine.

Hertz came in in a little while, inquired after his friend from the landlord and was steered over to the corner where Pelly sat.

He seemed preoccupied and puzzled, but he waited until a drink had been served to him, before saying:

"Do you feel better, my friend?"

Pelly nodded:

"A little. Did you see Inspector Heinrich and get things straightened out?"

Hertz frowned and shook his head slowly:

"No. The local policeman was most unhelpful. Seemed to resent having a superior snooping around in the first place. But it appears that the inspector went to the school to investigate

Susan's disappearance two days ago, and has now disappeared himself."

"He probably went straight back to Vienna when he found she was dead."

"No," said Hertz slowly. "That's the funny thing. He would have gone back to the police station to collect his things. And when his driver went up to the school to collect him that evening, the man was told that he had already gone."

Pelly dismissed it with a gesture. The ways of the Austrian police were no concern of his:

"What do you think of this death certificate?"

Hertz sighed and his reply was cautious:

"The theory is perfectly consistent with my examination. A heart attack, probably during the fall. It's a quite usual occurrence ... That there are certain reprehensible aspects of the matter goes without saying. I would certainly like the chance of a word with this Doctor Froheim, whoever he may be ..."

Pelly frowned as he remembered the professor's words in the coach:

"But those marks – the ones you said that you saw on Susan's throat?"

Hertz avoided his friend's eye by looking down into his glass, and he spoke with a firm finality:

"I can give no explanation of them."

Pelly leant forward. His voice was hoarse:

"Tell me, Professor, is there any truth – in all these stories they tell in this part of the world?"

"Stories?"

"Yes – about strange animals and vampires?"

"Vampires?"

Pelly tried to smile, make light of his fears:

"I know it must sound crazy to you, but – well, I'd believe anything before I'd imagine that Susan – you said yourself that there was a strange loss of blood ..."

Hertz shrugged it off and said drily:

"Understandable – under the circumstances."

Pelly gripped his friend's arm and said slowly:

"If those were indeed the circumstances."

Professor Hertz was silent for a moment before replying. Then he spoke very carefully:

"Mr. Pelly, old friend, I already told you, I cannot say with

certainty that your daughter died for any reason, but – that her heart had ceased to beat."

There came the sound of a coach from outside the inn and Pelly and his companion both looked towards the door. As it opened they could see that it was nearly dark. An ostler entered with a number of bags and spoke to the landlord, who broke away from some of his regular customers to point out the stairs and hand over a key. As the ostler went up the stairs with the bags, the landlord went back to his cronies, and glanced over to Pelly and Hertz in the corner:

"I think they're arguing about it now. There can be no argument about the marks on the girl's neck though."

"That's what I heard," said one of the men.

"There was the schoolmaster, too. The undertaker brought him in. Heart attack is what they said, but he had the marks on the neck."

The landlord shuddered:

"There's an evil about that castle – always has been."

Over in their corner, Professor Hertz shook his head at Pelly's renewed questioning:

"I can do nothing, give no opinion. We are talking about matters that are beyond the comprehension of science. We are talking of the dark imaginings of primitive men. About metaphysics – the nature of good and evil. You don't need a doctor for that, you need a priest."

The door to the inn suddenly reopened, and Hertz and Pelly both looked up. Hertz gasped with surprise. In the doorway stood the rotund figure of a bishop, flanked by two thin clerics, their plain black garb contrasting with the scarlet band round the bishop's hat.

The bishop looked round the room and beamed on the staring occupants, before saying in a loud voice:

"This looks a comfortable enough place. I've had my bellyful of journeying for today."

He gave a tired smile and raised his hand as the landlord came round the bar and bowed low to him, before leading him to the stairs and his room.

"I think I'll clean up, then come down for a bite to eat."

He disappeared up the stairs, and Pelly said:

"Well, there's your priest. I will speak to him when he comes down. Will you explain it all to him."

For a moment, it looked as if Hertz would refuse. Then, he sighed and smiled:

"All right, my friend. I will help you."

CHAPTER NINE

Richard brooded over his problems in his room all day. He had laid in a good supply of wine and schnapps, and, by evening, he was very drunk.

He waited patiently for darkness to fall, then for the hour of lights out to come. Ten o'clock came and went, and, from his window, he could see lights going out in the main building.

Richard left his room and stumbled down the stairs. He felt strangely light-headed, but he was decided on his course of action. If Mircalla were a vampire, it was only because she was trapped, a victim of the curse. That she loved him, he doubted not, and that night, when they had made love in the cemetery, she had loved him as a woman, had not bitten into his flesh to take his blood.

He would take her far away from this evil valley where she might be out of the power of the forces of darkness, and his to love and cherish.

He staggered across the yard, and grasped the handle of the back door. The door would not budge. It had been locked from the inside. Richard stood for a while, cursing softly and undecided. The locked door would be Janet Playfair's doing. Damn the little bitch and her jealousy.

And then, for a moment, he smiled into the darkness, as he remembered her admission of love for him, and the softness of her face and her tears. He suddenly felt lonely and frightened.

With a renewed cursing, he threw off his thoughts and staggered round the side of the building and up onto the terrace. He wobbled along it, trying each window in turn. For the whole length of the house there was none on the ground floor that was open. At last, out of patience, and made incautious with the drink, he smashed in a pane of glass with his foot, opened the catch, and climbed noisily into the building.

Upstairs, Amanda McBride pulled her robe tightly about her

and flitted from the shadow of her doorway down the corridor towards Mircalla's room. Once there, she knocked softly, and the occupant opened the door immediately, as if she had been waiting behind it for the signal. Amanda slid past Mircalla into the room. By the time she turned round, the door was shut, and she did not notice the other girl's turn of the key as she shut the door.

Amanda clapped her hands together with excitement:

"Well, come on, where is it?"

Mircalla smiled and went over to her cupboard. She knelt down and produced a box from beneath her dresses. Opening it, she revealed the cake inside, together with a knife. She cut a slice and handed it to Amanda.

"Thanks, Mircalla – where are the others?"

Mircalla straightened up:

"There are no others coming."

Amanda frowned:

"But you said you would ask them. You told me not to say a word, in case Miss Playfair found out."

Mircalla came towards her, her face expressionless:

"But I did not ask the others. It was only you that I wanted."

Amanda felt suddenly afraid. She dropped the remains of the cake on the floor and walked to the door. She tried the handle, then turned, her eyes wide with fear:

"The door's locked. Give me the key at once. Stop being so silly."

Mircalla walked towards her again, her coal-black eyes dilating. She caught Amanda's in her own, and the girl was helpless, mesmerised by the vampire.

Amanda stood very still, her mind taken from her, unable to move, unable to take her eyes off the girl before her. Mircalla reached forward, and opened the Scottish girl's robe. Then she let her hands travel slowly down the girl's sides, over her hips and flanks, then back up again and across to caress the tiny brown-nippled breasts.

She began to breathe heavily, then, with one hand, she undid her own robe and moved close, pressing her body against that of the mesmerised girl. Mircalla shuddered with pleasure as their bodies touched, but she still did not take her eyes off the girl who stood helpless before her.

Mircalla removed her hands and pulled the robe from the girl's shoulders so that it fell in a heap at her feet. Then she

looked away for the first time, looking back quickly, making sure that the trance was complete.

In the instant she moved, Amanda remained quite still, and Mircalla smiled her satisfaction as she led the girl slowly over to her bed, and helped her to lie down, facing upwards, her thighs slightly open, relaxed, inviting.

The vampire enjoyed the pleasure of looking down upon the young beauty of her victim for a moment, then climbed on top of her, her hands groping for and finding her.

She pressed onto the girl as she stroked and Amanda's mouth opened with a small moan of pleasure. Mircalla kissed her hard on the lips, her tongue searching the other girl's mouth, then felt the pleasure of the girl's response. She moved her head down, across the cheek, then to the neck. Her lips curled back to reveal the fangs hidden beneath them, and her head reared back to strike.

Then, at the last moment, she stopped herself, and looked down at the tiny warm breasts. She moved her hands over Amanda's body, and stroked the already hard nipple of her left breast. Then her mouth went down on it and bit into the soft warm flesh.

The landlord met the bishop at the bottom of the stairs:

"My Lord, there are two gentlemen would wish a word with you. One is Professor Hertz from Vienna, the other an American, but a gentleman."

The bishop was amused by the distinction and went over to meet Pelly and Hertz at once. He sat down with them and said:

"Well, gentlemen, and what can I do for you."

There was a silence and Pelly glared up at the landlord. It was only when all three men were looking up at him that he took the hint and went back to his bar, chastened.

At once he saw Pelly lean forward and begin to talk to the bishop, quickly and earnestly, in a low urgent tone.

"What's all that about?" asked one of the customers as the landlord came back behind the bar. The man leaned forward and said in a conspiratorial whisper:

"He's telling about his daughter – about the marks on her neck – about the vampires."

The man nodded sagely:

"Best thing. They are the disciples of the devil, and it takes the sons of God to deal with them."

Another man nearby looked up. He was young and his eyes were red. He pounded his fist angrily on the bar :

"I say that it is fitting work for any man. Let's all go up there to the castle and put stakes through all their evil hearts, once and for all."

The landlord raised his hand :

"Calm down, Hans. His Lordship the Bishop will know what is for the best."

"You can say that. It was my Gerda who fell into their clutches."

"No one can say for sure," said another man. "She just disappeared. Seems likely that she ran away from your rough wooing, and with another man from beyond the valley."

Hans reddened and lunged at the speaker, but the landlord caught his arm with his powerful red hand :

"I'll have none of that in here, Hans. You will do your brawling elsewhere. Like I said, the bishop will know what is to be done."

Hans calmed down quickly, then turned to the men around him :

"And I say this – if the bishop is brave enough to get up off his fat backside and go to the castle, I say that we all go with him, to lend him aid."

The landlord nodded along with the others :

"Here's my promise upon it. For them it would be the Lord's work, and every man in the village would be with us in it."

In his corner, Pelly finished his story, adding :

"And I am told that others have died in the last few days, all with the same marks on their throats."

The bishop, who despite his vast bulk was an active man, and no coward, thought for a moment, then said :

"There is only one course of action. If this is true, the valley must be cleansed and exorcised of this evil once and for all, and at once."

"You are with us, then?"

"Of course."

He stood up and went over to the bar :

"Landlord, I am informed that this village is troubled by the curse of vampirism. If I go and investigate this evil, are there those present who would come with me."

The occupants of the bar roared their answer as one man.

Richard tripped up the stairs, but finally made the landing. He swayed noisily along the corridor, and tried the handle of Mircalla's room. To his surprise, it was locked. He beat on the door panel, then put his ear to it. He could hear a moaning sound, as if someone was in pain, then, cutting across it, came Mircalla's voice:

"Who is it?"

"Mircalla, it is I, Richard."

"Go away. I cannot see you now."

"But you will see me, now, open this door." He began to beat against the panels, and after a moment, he heard her cross the room and the sound of the key being put in the lock. The door opened a crack and the girl's face appeared:

"What do you want?"

"You." Richard tried to push the door open, but she held it fast. Behind her, Amanda was moaning softly, holding the wound in her breast, and this Richard must not see.

"Go away," snapped Mircalla. "I do not want to see you."

Richard digested this drunkenly for a moment, then made another attempt to open the door:

"You've got a man in there?"

"No I have not. There is no one. Now go away."

"Oh, yes there is a man in there. Who is it? I want to know? I demand to know?"

Mircalla began to cry, and Richard stepped back, aware even in his befuddled state, that he had somehow offended her. The girl spat at him:

"I hate you. I don't ever want to see you again. Now go away and leave me in peace."

She slammed the door and turned the key, locking her room. Richard pounded on the panels, shouting:

"Mircalla, Mircalla."

He stopped abruptly, suddenly aware that he was being watched by more than one pair of eyes. All the doors leading to the other girls' rooms were open and they were in the doorways, staring at him, giggling.

As he looked, Janet appeared at the far end of the corridor, still dressed. She looked at him accusingly, and he could not face the pain in her eyes. He turned and fled drunkenly down the stairs.

In her room, as she crouched against the door, Mircalla heard his receding footsteps as he crashed down the stairs. Then she

heard Janet's unsteady voice:

"All right, girls, the show's over. Back to your rooms, you're supposed to be asleep."

One by one, she heard the doors close until there was silence again in the building and Janet's footsteps receded down the corridor as she went back to her own room.

Mircalla turned back to her victim. Amanda lay sprawled on the bed, her legs wide, her hands clutching at her wounded breast. Her eyes were shut, but she raised her head and groaned

"Mircalla, come to me."

Mircalla glided over to the girl, and stroked her body with her cold white hands. The girl writhed in her trance, torn between exquisite pain and exquisite pleasure. She held out her arms, the blood smeared on her hands, and pulled Mircalla down on top of her.

The vampire lowered her head, and once more the teeth bit into the torn flesh of the breast, and she began to suck the life blood from her willing victim.

It took Amanda longer to die than it had taken Susan, but, when she was finished, Mircalla climbed off the dead body of her victim, and sat trembling with ecstasy for a moment, sated by her feast. For the moment, she gave no thought to what she would do with her victim's body, for it was the first meal she had taken since the death of Giles.

Pelly, Hertz and the bishop stood by the bar of the inn, taking a drink of rum to fortify themselves against the night, as they waited for the farmers and villagers to assemble in the square in front of the church.

The babble of sound from outside rose as they collected, each one carrying a lighted torch that would show their way.

"Will you share our coach, my Lord Bishop," asked Pelly as he put down his glass.

The bishop, to whom the night's work was beginning to feel more and more like a great adventure, and less like a duty of the Church, shook his head and beamed:

"No, but I thank you kindly. I must travel at the head of my flock, alone, as did the princes of the Church of old when they went out to smite their enemies."

The landlord leant forward:

"I have you a horse, My Lord. It is outside, saddled and waiting."

"But you must be tired," said Pelly. "You said when you arrived that you had journeyed all day."

The bishop beamed at him. An American he might be, but as the landlord had said, he was a gentleman:

"Yes, Mr. Pelly, I will admit that I am tired. But to exorcise the spirits of evil and the powers of darkness is my holy and sacred duty. And from what you have told me, there are no spirits as evil, in these parts, as the spirits of the Karnsteins in their unholy castle."

And with that, he put down his glass and made for the door, leaving Pelly, Hertz and the landlord to trail in his wake.

Outside, they stopped, surprised, for the square was almost as light as day, and filled with villagers, women as well as men, holding their flaming torches aloft.

At the sight of the bishop, they gave out a great cheer. Then a man brought a horse forward, and tried to help the bishop to mount, a feat he completed with some difficulty.

Hertz said:

"Mr. Pelly, shall we go to our carriage."

Pelly nodded and the two men walked round the side of the inn, where their driver was waiting.

The bishop moved forward on his horse until he stood at the road that led out of the square towards the castle. Some of the braver villagers, including Hans, had already started along it, and their torches could be seen flickering in the distance.

The bishop raised his cross, then pointed:

"Forward," he cried, and the great crowd began to surge out of the square, as the bishop started his horse at a slow pace up the road – like a general leading his men forward to battle.

Richard sat down heavily at the bottom of the stairs, as he heard the doors slamming above him, and Janet ordering the girls back into their rooms.

He shook his head, trying to clear his reeling brain. He felt very angry with himself. He had come in, like a knight in shining armour, ready to rescue his lady from the mortal danger that faced and threatened her, only to be rejected out of hand – and rejected for another, of that he was convinced.

He heaved himself up on his feet, swayed for a moment from the effects of the liquor, then righted himself, as he pondered what he should do next.

The main thing, he considered after a moment, was to have

another drink. That would clear his head and make logical thinking easier. He could not give up Mircalla as easily as that.

He used the wall to prop himself up as he staggered down the corridor to the back door, then fumbled with the key. He went across the yard at an angle, found the stable entrance with some difficulty in the dark, and groped for the stairs. After two falls he achieved the landing and staggered into the room.

He sat down heavily on one of the chairs to rest from his exertions, then remembered the reason for his sudden return. He staggered over to the cupboard near the desk, and, opening it, he pulled out a bottle. It was empty, and he threw it on the floor, where it smashed. He tried another and then another, but with a similar result.

Richard turned to the table, and the bottles there were all empty too, and, with a curse, he swept them to the floor. His staggering brought him to the desk, and he sat heavily in the chair that faced it. Open, on the desk, lay the book which contained the portrait of Countess Carmilla Karnstein. He glowered down at it now, and it seemed to him that the eyes and mouth were laughing at him from the picture, mocking him.

He picked up the book and threw it across the room, feeling an instant of remorse as the old binding gave and the book came apart, the pages fluttering down over his bed.

Then, quite suddenly, he broke down, and began to sob uncontrollably, for the face in the portrait was still before him. Giles had been right. Carmilla Karnstein and Mircalla Herritzen were one and the same – he loved one of the undead, the cursed of the centuries, a vampire.

He felt suddenly very cold and small. A drink would cure that. He saw a gleam under the table and knelt down, but it was only one of the bottles he had knocked over. He crawled round the floor on all fours, looking for some liquor that was not finished, but found none.

At last, he got up and staggered out of the door and down the stairs. He would go to the village. There he would find wine in plenty, and convivial company in which to drink it.

Richard did not bother to take the drive, but staggered through the trees, making straight for the road. The branches and twigs tore at his clothes and face but he was past caring and made no effort to protect himself. At last he staggered out onto the road and began to stumble down it towards the village.

He felt as if his knees would give way at any moment, and, with a superhuman effort, he spurred himself on.

Then, coming up the road, he saw an army of dancing torches, and heard the noise of a great crowd, talking and shouting at one another as they came forward. He blinked and passed his hand over his eyes. Could he be seeing things.

He took another pace forward, and pitched onto his face in the dirt.

It was Hans who ran forward from the crowd and knelt beside him to lift him up. As other men came forward with stakes, he waved them away:

"This is no enemy, it is Mr. Lestrange. He must be ill."

"Drunk, more like," chuckled another man. "Cor, smell his breath."

Richard flickered open his eyes, and Hans helped him to his feet. He looked round at the procession which had now halted, the bishop at its head:

"Hans . . . what's going on here, for God's sake?"

"I thought you were up at the school," was the young man's reply.

Richard shook his head:

"I was on my way to the inn."

"You'll find no one left there," smiled Hans, then his face went grim: "The whole village, to the last man, is on this march."

"March? But where to?"

"We go to the castle."

"What for?"

Hans frowned:

"We go to find the Karnsteins – or their graves. We go to dig out their bodies and push our stakes through their evil hearts, to rid the world of their curse."

The bishop ordered the procession forward at that moment, as Mr. Pelly, unable to get his carriage through the crush, climbed down and came up to walk alongside him.

Richard staggered to the side of the road to let the people pass him. His head was still spinning as he tried to digest Hans' words. Then, suddenly, it all came clear to him, like a douche of cold water.

All at once, he was stone cold sober, and he began to run after the front of the procession, screaming:

"Wait, please wait."

There was only one thought in his head – that he must save Mircalla.

In her room, Mircalla heard the noise of the procession up the road, and it woke her from her reverie. She took one last glance at Amanda's cold, dead body, then glided to the door, inserted the key and opened it. She looked cautiously down the corridor, but it was empty, and she closed the door softly behind her and made for the stairs.

She wanted to see Richard, at once, now, while she was sated in her lust for blood and there was no danger that she would attack him, for she loved him with a fierce intensity that frightened and amazed her.

Mircalla went down the stairs, along the corridor and across the yard. A light was burning in Richard's room, and she went up his stairs and burst in. But the room was empty. Only the smashed bottles on the floor gave witness to his recent presence.

She went back out into the stable yard, undecided for a moment. Then she went to the front of the house, and saw the reason for the noise. She could see the torches of the procession as they went past the entrance to the drive and up the hill towards the castle on the mountainside.

She felt a sudden pang of fear, then knew what she must do – she must go to join her parents. She rounded the building, went quickly along the terrace, and then began to flit across the lawn and up the path to the old cemetery.

Janet sat in her room, still hurt and puzzled by Richard's behaviour. As she thought more about it, she realized he had been knocking on Mircalla's door, but the girl had not appeared. She got up and paced the room for a moment, then decided. She left her room and walked down the corridor to the girl's room.

Janet took a moment to compose herself, then knocked quietly on the door, afterwards holding her ear close to the panel for the muffled invitation to enter. But there was no reply.

She waited for a moment, then opened the door, moving inside the room quickly and closing it behind her. Then she turned, and what she saw made her want to be sick. She opened her mouth to scream, then remembered the other girls, and

managed to regain control of herself, but with her eyes hidden from the terrible sight on the bed.

It was a good minute before she felt strong enough to look again. Then she walked unsteadily over to the bed, and looked down at the wrinkled bloodless face of the naked girl who lay there.

The girl was Amanda McBride, the shell of her body lying abandoned on the bed, the jagged holes in her breast testifying to the horrible manner of her death.

Somehow, by instinct, Janet made the door. She took the key from the inside, closed the door behind her and locked it with a shaking hand. Then she went back through the nerve-shattering darkness to her own room. She did not breathe again until the door was closed safely behind her and she was leaning up against it, panting for air.

Her breath regained, she moved slowly to her bed, her legs suddenly like lead. She sat down, moaning to herself, as she tried to steady her mind, and work out what she should do next.

Reluctantly she found that Richard was her only immediate hope. Miss Simpson was too ill to be disturbed, the shock would probably kill her ; and Miss Carstairs would be useless in a crisis of this kind.

She took the precaution of lighting a candle and putting it in a holder by the window before she left the room. As she picked up the candle, she saw a figure in white flit across the lawn towards the path that led to the castle cemetery – Mircalla.

Janet went slowly down the corridor, the flickering candle making horrific shadows that chased her down the stairs and along the corridor to the yard.

Richard's room was deserted, and she turned up her nose in disgust at the broken bottles that gave witness to his drunken debauch.

As she came back out of the stables, debating in her mind what she should do, she saw the torches of the procession at the end of the drive, and, dropping the candle, and unmindful of its light, she ran down the drive towards the lights of the mob.

CHAPTER TEN

High on the ramparts of Castle Karnstein, two men looked down as they watched the torchlight of the procession from the village. Count Karnstein's coal-black eyes were sombre as he turned to his cloak-wrapped coachman.

"They have halted now, just before the school, but they will come on to us soon. Is the coach prepared for the journey?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"Then see to it, man, and I will fetch my wife. Our daughter, we must collect from the school on our way."

The Count and his devil coachman went back into the building and down the stairs to the mouldering great hall. The Countess was standing there, waiting for them:

"Well my dear, what is it?"

"They have come for us, my beloved. Our peasants are turning on us, overcoming their fears by their numbers. I am afraid that it is time for us to leave."

The Countess rose, and put her hand to her breast:

"But Carmilla?"

"We must collect her from the school on our way."

But their daughter was already hurrying up the path to the old cemetery to join them.

Pelly walked alongside the bishop at the head of the procession. It was slower now, the road was steeper. He pointed at the bishop's followers:

"All this, it's horrible."

The bishop shook his head and pointed ahead:

"Yes, my son. But up there are the agents of the devil. They live only on human blood, and all they touch retains their evil."

"Is there no other way to rid the world of them?"

"None. Only a stake through the heart will suffice, or the severing of the head from the body."

Pelly shook his head in disgust, but protested no more. A little way behind, Richard had caught up with Hans, and, completely recovered from his drinking, he was pleading with the angry young villager:

"Why are you doing this thing?"

"To rid the valley of the Karnsteins, once and for all."

"But there are no Karnsteins," shouted Richard. "They are all dead."

"But their spirits live on," answered Hans. "They take another shape and no one knows them."

"Then how will you know them," asked Richard.

Hans paused to face him :

"Because, at night, sated with the blood of their victims, they return to their graves. There is where we will find them."

He moved on, and Richard fell to his knees by the side of the road. He clasped his hands together :

"Oh, God, not Mircalla, preserve her from this nightmare, please God."

Suddenly, he realised that the villagers were passing him by and he got up and began to run forward to the front of the procession, to try to speak to the bishop.

It took him a few moments of superhuman effort, but at last he was up with them :

"My Lord, My Lord, wait, you must stop."

The bishop frowned at the sight of the untidy newcomer, his clothing and face torn and scratched. Angry hands came to drag Richard back, but with an effort, he shook them off and caught up again, trying to catch at the reins :

"Listen to me, My Lord."

The horse reared and the bishop concentrated all his efforts on keeping in the saddle, with the help of Pelly, who grabbed the reins and calmed the animal down. Once more the procession halted behind the massive mounted bulk of its leader. The bishop pointed at Richard in some alarm :

"Who is this man ?"

Before anyone could answer, Richard had to shake off more of the villagers who had run forward again :

"Damn you, listen to me."

The bishop was affronted to be thus addressed, and this time the combined weight of the villagers who came forward was enough to pull Richard right away. It was the landlord from the inn who ran up to give the bishop his answer :

"He is an English writer, My Lord – a madman."

The bishop smiled and nodded, satisfied by the explanation, but Pelly looked back, curious about the young Englishman.

Richard, meanwhile, was hustled down the line of the pro-

cession, but at last managed to break free, and stood by the roadside, shouting at those who went past:

"You are all lunatics. Don't you see – she's a victim herself. She can't help it. If you will not save her, I must."

Hans came up to him:

"Save who?"

"Mircalla," Richard breathed, then realized that in saying her name he had condemned her to death from his own mouth, rather than saved her.

In the still undisturbed quiet of the courtyard in front of Karnstein Castle, the horses pounded the ground, as they stood in the shafts of the great black coach, anxious to be away. The coachman was walking around, checking the animals and their attachments. At last he was finished, the coach was ready for its hasty departure, and he climbed onto the box to await the orders. Though he could hear the sound of the mob through the dark still night, he was not yet afraid.

The Count had returned to his place on the battlements from where he looked down onto the torches. They had reached the entrance to the castle, and had halted by the large gates, which now stood open to allow for the speedy departure of the coach. As the Count watched grimly from his high perch, he could see some of the torches detach themselves from the main body as men began to fan out to surround the castle – a small band making for the cemetery, and thence to the small gateway that led into the castle grounds. Time was getting very short.

The Count hurried down through the old corridors and the main staircase:

"It is time."

The Countess rose and went with him across the great hall and out onto the steps.

At the castle gates, the bishop managed to stop his horse, as the more militant villagers began to fan out for the attack on the castle.

"Wait, wait," pleaded the bishop. But, if the men heard him, they took no notice.

Pelly ran up to the bishop:

"What is the matter?"

"It must be done my way. They must not set fire to the castle."

"But if they do, then the occupants will be burnt – will that not end the problem?"

"No, my son, for only their bodies will be burnt, their souls will still be on earth, ready to inhabit the bodies of others – perhaps of men who are here tonight."

The Countess hurried down the steps and into the coach, as the Count glanced towards a noise from the direction of the cemetery. In the gloom, he could see a white-robed figure flitting between the gravestones, making for the castle gate. It was Mircalla. A group of men with torches were racing across the cemetery to head her off, but the Count could see that she was well ahead of them. But her arrival here and now would make his escape impossible.

As Mircalla made the gate and slammed it behind her, before running to her father, the Count opened the door of the coach:

"Come, my dear, we are too late. Let us go back into the castle."

The Countess climbed down from the coach and ran back up the steps, joined by Mircalla. The Count saw them safely inside, then, with a wave of acknowledgement to his coachman, he went inside, shut the great door, and brought down the great metal bar that would keep the door in place.

As soon as the doors were shut, the coachman turned his eyes away from them and glanced down the drive. The invasion had already begun as the light of torches danced up towards him.

For the first time, he felt afraid. He brought down his whip on the flanks of the horses, and they jumped into life, jerking the coach forward, then speeding up as it started down the drive.

The first of the villagers jumped aside to let it pass, but others, a little further back, showed more courage. They leapt up to grab the heads of the horses, and the coach slowly came to a halt.

Men surged forward, ducking as the coachman, petrified now, flailed wildly with his whip. Then, in seconds, it was plucked from his hands and men had swarmed up on the coach and had dragged him down from his box.

He was thrown to the ground and the men around began to club him with their sticks, as he tried to rise. Suddenly, he turned, and with a superhuman effort he broke free. The mob

still surrounded him and he snarled at them, baring his teeth so that the fangs showed in the light of the torches – the fangs of a vampire.

At first the men were frozen, but when he charged forward to break a way out of the ring, they fell upon him and dragged him to the ground, where they held him, spreadeagled, lying flat on his back, a blazing torch held close to his snarling face.

Pelly came forward and looked down at the ghastly sight. A villager cried:

"Quick, a stake."

A man ran forward, and for the first time the coachman looked as if the fear of God was in him. He struggled wildly with his captors, but somehow, they held him down.

The landlord stepped forward and the sight of him shook Pelly. His usually friendly round face was distorted with a terrible anger. He snatched the stake and mallet from the hands of the man who had proffered them:

"I will do it."

He stepped forward, and knelt by the pinned man, who struggled more wildly than ever as he saw his fate confronting him. The landlord placed the point of the stake carefully over the doomed man's heart, then raised the mallet, only to bring it down with terrifying force. A great gout of blood shot up, spattering the clothing of those nearest to the vampire, and from the dying soul, there went up to the skies a terrifying animal scream of agony.

The landlord got up, his face suddenly at peace after the terrible thing he had done. At his feet, the body that was now skewered to the soft earth by its heart, began to crumble into dust.

Hans and Richard came up at that moment, and Hans gasped in amazement as the body vanished, leaving only the clothes on the ground:

"How – is that a miracle – or a trick of the devil?"

Richard gave a sombre sigh:

"His body has long been dead. For he was over two hundred years old."

From somewhere nearby, someone shouted:

"They're trapped, the three of them, in the castle."

The crowd began to surge forward. Richard paled. The man had shouted three. He ran up through the crowd and made the great court in front of the doors with the first of them. He grab-

bed the man who had shouted:

"Who is inside."

"The vampires. They are trapped."

"But you said three?"

"Yes. The Count and Countess and another."

'Another? Who?"

The man shrugged:

"I know not. There was a girl. She ran through the cemetery ahead of us. We nearly caught her, but not quite. She ran inside with the man and woman at the coach."

Richard grabbed the man by the lapels, an almost mad gleam of desperation in his eyes:

"But how do you know she is a vampire?"

The man pushed him away:

"When we chased her, she turned and snarled at us. We saw her fangs in the torchlight."

He pushed Richard away, so that he fell backwards onto the ground. For a moment, he made no attempt to rise, but lay there, his heart gnawed away by despair. Was there no way to save her now? Was he helpless in the face of his enemies?

Richard brought himself to with a snap of his head. He got up, perhaps there was some way still open, then he despaired anew at the sight that greeted his eyes. Some of the villagers had run forward and had thrown their torches at the great wooden doors of the castle, and at the windows. The flickering light from inside the castle told him that their efforts had met with success, and the castle was ablaze. The fire had taken a hold on the great doors, and a group of the villagers were waiting for them to collapse so that they could enter.

Another group were running off to the cemetery, amid shouts of:

"Find their graves. Let us kill them as they lie."

The bishop rode up and jumped from his horse:

"Stop, stop at once, you fools – fire will not serve to rid us of this evil – it is useless. Nothing will destroy the vampires except the stake, or decapitation. Hold back your torches, in God's name, I command you."

But it was of no use, the villagers were out of control, their blood lust had been aroused and there was no way to stop them now.

Inside the castle, Count Karnstein listened to the sound of

the mob waiting outside, and smiled at the Countess as he saw the flames beginning to eat at the great door, and the torches hurtle through the window, catching light to the ancient furnishings, which blazed up like tinder. He glanced from his wife to Mircalla, his resurrected daughter, and said :

"I think we should go to the chapel. It is all wood and will make a stronger blaze."

Wife and daughter returned his smile, and he took his wife's arm and led her slowly to the archway that led to the chapel, Mircalla following behind them.

A few of the torches had come through the chapel windows, and the old benches were already alight. Count Karnstein and his family moved calmly down the aisle, then climbed the steps to the altar and turned to watch the fire taking hold, and to calmly await their tormentors.

Outside, Richard edged his way towards the steps of the castle, ready to dash through into the great hall, ahead of the villagers. Behind him, the bishop was going hoarse, shouting for order. People jostled past him, but he was intent on only one thing.

The door was really ablaze now, and it was a matter of minutes before one half of it collapsed in a cloud of smoke and flame, which, for just a moment, obscured the hall and entrance from the villagers.

In that moment, Richard moved. Holding his hands up to his face to protect his eyes from the flames and smoke, he dashed through the entrance.

Below the steps, Pelly, who was standing near the bishop, saw him go through the ring of flame and shouted at him to stop, but he had disappeared by the time the words had left his lips. He dashed forward in an attempt to follow, but was beaten back by the flames.

As he ran back down the steps, coughing and spluttering from the smoke, Janet Playfair ran up to him and gripped his arm :

"Who went inside? Who was it?"

Pelly took a moment to get his breath :

"It was the young Englishman. The writer. The man the villagers think is mad – and now I believe them."

Janet began to cry, and clawed at his arm :

"You must get him out, you must, you must."

Pelly shook his head:

"No. No one can live in there now, it is like an inferno. He is lost, I'm afraid."

Janet collapsed onto the grass and began to pray.

Once past the blazing doorway and into the spaciousness of the high-ceilinged great hall, it was easier to breathe. The heat was intense, but Richard halted, coughing the smoke from his lungs, and glanced round.

The fire had a good hold now, but Richard was relieved to see that the hall was empty. He made first for the stairs, but they were blazing too, and the flames beat him back.

Then he remembered the chapel, and the way it had been laid out as if for Black Mass, the day he had gone there, so many centuries ago it now seemed, from the village, and had been frightened by the girls from the school – his introduction into the nightmare that was now reaching its climax.

He darted to the chapel door.

Through the archway, he could see the flames licking at the remains of the chapel, but, shielding his eyes again, he tried to get through. Once, twice, the heat beat him back, but at the third attempt he succeeded and ran into the aisle that led to the altar.

At first he could see nothing for smoke and flame. Then for a moment, as the smoke cleared slightly, he saw that there was a clear area by the altar that the fire had not yet reached. Three people stood calmly, their backs to him, facing the reversed cross that was the centre-piece of the Black Mass. He recognized the form of Mircalla in her white robe at once, the golden hair streaming down her back.

He cupped his hands to shout above the noise of the fire, and screamed:

"Mircalla."

There was a loud cracking sound as he shouted which obscured his voice, so that she did not hear.

Richard looked up at the ceiling, and the sight filled him with a renewed alarm. The rafters of the chapel ceiling, lower than those in the great hall, were ablaze, and beginning to sag as fire burnt into the cross-beams.

With a renewed urgency, he cupped his hands and shouted again:

"Mircalla, Mircalla."

This time the girl heard him and turned swiftly, her eyes searching through the pall of smoke and the sheet of flame. But she made no move to come towards him, though Richard saw her hand go to her breast, as if with joy at seeing him.

Throwing caution to the winds, he began to run along the aisle, and he was half-way when Mircalla left her parents and started towards him.

They shouted for her to come back, but she paid them no need. In the middle of the aisle, Richard stopped, the sound of the flames, the smell of the smoke forgotten as she ran happily towards him, her arms held out to greet him. Miraculously, the flames through which she came did not catch her robe, and suddenly, she was in his arms.

Above there came another ominous crack, and Richard and the girl both glanced up to see a great cross-beam begin to sag and crack just above their heads.

The flames were coming closer now, but neither of them noticed as they stood in each other's arms. The Count and Countess, watching from the altar, were touched by the tongues of flame, and smiled as their bodies began to burn, clasping their hands. Whatever pain they suffered in their burning was better by far than to suffer the ultimate fate of total death.

"We must go," said Richard.

"No, my love," said Mircalla. "Stay here with me, the flames cannot harm me."

In her coal-black eyes, Richard read that nothing could persuade her to leave the castle with him. He glanced behind and saw that the flames had gained such a hold that it was probably too late anyway. His choice had been made for him. He would stay here and die in the arms of his beloved.

He leant forward as the beam above cracked in the centre, and kissed her passionately. Her lips found his, then brushed away, against his cheek, then down to his neck.

Suddenly, she drew her head back, and her lips curled back to reveal the vicious fangs. She readied herself to strike, and in that moment, Richard suddenly was afraid. He jerked his head back to avoid the strike, and looked up, in time to see the broken beam begin to fall.

With all his might, he pushed Mircalla to one side in an effort to save her, but she clung to him, then slipped and began to fall backwards.

The flaming point of the beam hurtled down past Richard's

head, and buried itself in the girl's breast, suddenly exposed as the robe slipped away in her fall. As Richard looked on in an agony of shock, her dying scream rose and drummed at his ears, like the cry of anguish of some wild animal.

Richard, oblivious to his own danger fell to his knees at her side, then backed away in startled shock as the soft flesh that he had loved began to crumble away, revealing the skeleton beneath, the skeleton from which she had been resurrected by the evil arts, only a month before.

Outside, watching the flames, Pelly turned to look down at Janet's kneeling figure as she intoned her prayers for Richard's safety. Something about the intensity of her plea, stirred a chord deep in his soul.

Out loud, he said to himself:

"Why should another but me die for my daughter's vengeance."

As Janet looked up at him in surprise, he ran forward once more up the steps and into the flames. This time, now that the door was merely hot charred remains, he got through into the great hall easily enough. A glance upwards told him the rafters would soon fall.

The hall itself was empty, and the great staircase had crashed down. Only on the left, where there was an archway, beyond which he could see more flames was there any hope. He dashed to the arch and peered into the smoke and flames beyond. Then he saw Richard, his back to him, kneeling on the ground, not moving.

Pelly ran to him, and saw his sightless eyes staring down at a skeleton that lay by him:

"Mr. Lestrange, come quickly, the roof is going."

Richard did not answer directly. He made a movement, as if to rise, then pitched forward, breaking the skeleton as he fell, unconscious.

With not a moment's thought to his own safety, Pelly reached down and picked up the fallen man. He humped him over his shoulder, then turned and made for the door. The journey seemed to take hours, but, suddenly, he was through the main hall and out onto the steps and the blessed, cool fresh air. He staggered down them, not far from collapse himself, and Janet ran towards him, her face lit up with joy. Between

them, they laid him on the grass, and began to loosen his clothes.

Janet gasped when she saw his face and came close to fainting. It bore an expression of shocked revulsion and horror, and his skin was white as chalk and cold and clammy:

"Is he dead," she whispered, not daring to listen for an answer.

Pelly turned round to look for Hertz, who came running up with his bag. He knelt down by the stricken man, and felt his pulse, then lifted one eyelid and inspected the eyeball. He turned to Janet, his face grave:

"He has suffered a great shock. Wrap him up warmly. The rest is in God's hands."

Despite this disclaimer, both he and Pelly sat with Richard all night, helping Janet to keep him warm and safe from further harm.

In the light of dawn, the smouldering fires of the remains of the castle died, and the bishop stood at the top of the great steps to exorcise the spot, and to pray that the souls of the Karnsteins would find refuge no more on earth.

"Let us kneel and pray."

The whole crowd doffed their caps and went wearily to their knees.

"Let us pray unto Almighty God that the family of Karnstein may never again return to plague the valleys of Styria, but that their souls should return to the places that he has appointed for them."

Janet turned away from the sight of the bishop as a groan came at her side. Richard stirred, then opened his eyes. He looked up for a moment at her worried face, then smiled to take away the wrinkled frown from her brow.

She smiled down at him and began to cry. Richard realised in that moment of coming back from death, that her tears were the most beautiful vision he had ever seen.

His hand came up and brushed a tear from her cheek, and in a moment, they were in each other's arms. Richard pulled her hungrily down to him, finding life and reality renewed in the contact of her lips.

The bishop finished his service, and the fire died, and normal life returned to the valley again, after nearly two centuries of terror.

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